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AUGUST • 42nd Year of Publication

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Editorial

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

A FEW YEARS ago, my mother gave me a framed print of a young girl reading. The girl, dressed in a yellow eighteenth-century gown, frowned in concentration as she paged through a thin brown book. "This reminds me of you when you were little," my mother said. "You always had your nose in a book."

I still do. I usually carry a purse big enough to hold a paperback, which appears when I'm waiting in line, in doctor's offices, or in traffic jams (which are, I must admit, pretty rare in Eugene, Oregon). I read magazines while I'm eating breakfast, and novels while I pedal my exercise bike. And, when I settle back to watch television, I read *TV Guide* during the commercials.

That's my leisure reading. I also read for my work. "Lucky you," my sister said. "You get paid for doing something you love."

Indeed I do, but editing is more than just reading. The little girl who always had her nose in a book could not have edited a magazine. In those years, I read indiscriminately — two, sometimes three books a day. If I ran out of books I had chosen, I read what was lying around the house (which was how I read Jacqueline Susann and Harold Robbins at the tender age of 10). Now, when I read, I'm paid to discriminate.

A thousand factors go into my evaluation of a story — and should you ever send me one (with a proper self-addressed, stamped envelope, thank you), and its writing is strong enough to get past my first reader (the person who screens for grammar, syntax, solid characterization and plot structure), you will probably get a note from me explaining what I liked and what I didn't like. Each case is as specific as I have time to make it. I have found, over the years, that whenever I make a blanket declaration of my dislikes, I pick up a manuscript the next day that proves me wrong.

So, aside from the mechanics, I find I look for one thing and one thing only: I want to be swept away. I want to lose myself in a place I have never been before, and when I surface, pages (minutes — days!)

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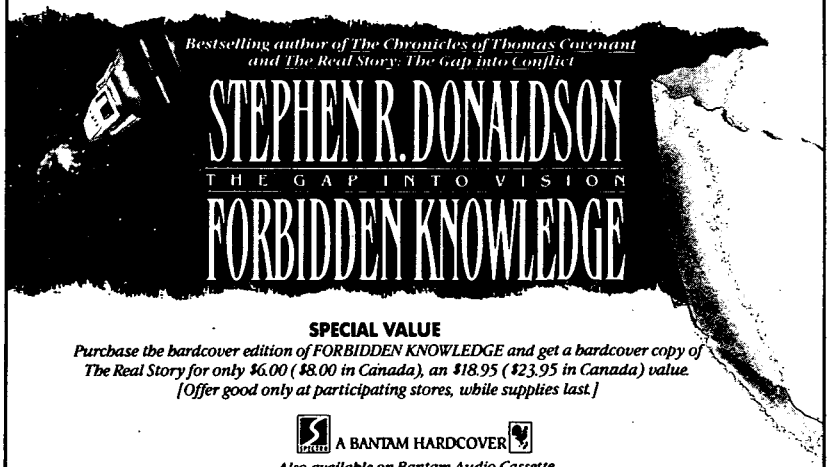
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To Our Readers

This Fall, F&SF will publish a combined October/November 42nd anniversary issue. At 240 pages, it will be the largest issue of new fiction we've ever published. On sale date is August 29, and subscribers will receive their copies shortly before this date. The next issue published will be December, on sale October 31. More details about the special double issue will appear next month.

later, I want to feel as if I have added a chunk of experience to my memory, a little bit of life I never would have seen on my own. In short, I want to be entertained.

Entertaining me has become very difficult. I've read more than my share of fiction over the years. A friend calculated that I have about 2,000 books left to read in my lifetime — not nearly enough to dent the surface of what's being published every year. And that prediction might be off, because it doesn't account for all the short stories I read. I want to make each story count. So I look for fiction that is a little bit exotic, a little bit strange. Fiction that gives me a new perspective on a place I've already seen.

The perspective allows me to make changes in my own life. It gives me an understanding of a relationship or a confidence I hadn't had. I gain friendships, and I gain experiences.

The more I read, the more I love the writers who can take me to those unusual places. I will continue reading, continue searching, and continue sharing those places when I find them. And, like that young girl in eighteenth-century dress, frozen forever in the act of reading a book, I hope I never stop.

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England's Whitechapel in the 1880's automatically suggests Jack the Ripper. This fictional setting has been used so often that it has become a familiar one — the clop of horse's hooves against cobblestone, the heavy fog blanketing the buildings, the yellow touch of gaslight — yet Dave Hoing manages to make all this new. "City of the Dreadful Night" is his eighth short story sale. He lives in Iowa and travels often to Europe. He has a particular fondness for England that shows in this cross-genre tale.

CITY OF THE DREADFUL NIGHT

By David Hoing

1.

ANNIE HARPER WAS young, not yet twenty-five, though she appeared much older. She'd been pretty once, before the death of her father several years before. Her family had been living on the edge even then, and the loss of her father's small income drove his three dependents—Annie; her infant brother, William; and her mother, Polly—deeper into the slums of the East End, where innocence and beauty were the first casualties of poverty. With no skills and no means of support, Annie resorted to one of the few options available to women in Whitechapel: prostitution. She became, in Victorian slang, an "unfortunate." The idea of whoring had bothered her at first; now she didn't give it any more thought than combing her hair. One trick for a

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cup of gin, two for a night's lodging in a doss house if she was too drunk to stagger back to her mother's basement tenement.

Her life was a succession of hours, a perpetual *now*. The problems of tomorrow would have to wait till tomorrow: it was useless to worry about something that far away when the needs of today hadn't yet been satisfied. She had no dreams, no ambitions. Whitechapel had claimed those long ago.

Wearing a shabby brown dress, petticoats, and a shawl, Annie sat in the waiting lounge of a medical clinic, trying to control her three-year-old daughter, Katy. The girl squirmed and fussed in her lap; she hated coming to the clinic, a converted warehouse in the Minories, even though the lady doctor who ran it always gave her candy when the examination was finished.

A woman practicing medicine was certainly startling to Annie, but a respectable doctor opening an office in disreputable Whitechapel was not. These days it was fashionable for "reformers" to be seen in the East End trying to improve the lot of the poor: Salvation Army volunteers and preachers, anarchists and socialists, writers and artists, middle-class visionaries, and yes, even doctors. Too self-congratulatory or idealistic, these crusaders were of little practical use to the poor. Those with the clout to affect real change, the elite of West End society, generally confined their indignation to politely angry editorials in the *Times* or debates in Parliament. (One exception was former Prime Minister William Gladstone. He made occasional "do-gooding" forays into Whitechapel, but his lone voice was not enough to shake his influential friends from their lethargy.)

Annie paid no attention to any of this. She'd grown accustomed to squalor and accepted it without bitterness or despair. Her life-style suited her. She slept; she ate; she fucked; she drank. Drinking was especially good; her only fear was boredom, and it was impossible to be bored when she was drunk.

Right now she was more concerned with a churning stomach. Though this part of London subjected her to every stink known to man, nothing could prepare her for the cloying scent of antiseptic that permeated the clinic. White walls and spotless floors were pretty, but the smell made her gag.

Still, she dragged Katy here every Sunday after Petticoat Lane. The lady

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doctor's name was Janis. Annie had met her by chance several weeks ago while buying carrots in Aldgate. The woman invited her to bring Katy to the Minories for free medical care. Annie was not a believer in the innate goodness of mankind, but a weekly shilling eased her doubts—quite a handsome wage for one small tube of her daughter's blood. Surely a child's momentary pain was worth a shilling?

Uneducated except in the streets, Annie was too ignorant to marvel at the clinic's advanced equipment. There was nothing to compare it with; she'd never been inside another clinic, though she passed London Hospital in Whitechapel Road nearly every day. Machines were just machines to her, as mysterious and uninteresting as the stars.

Katy wanted down from her lap. She was still rubbing the crook of her elbow where Janis had inserted the needle, but at least she'd stopped screaming.

"Wait," Annie said, her voice pure cockney.

The doctor returned from her office a few mintues later, bringing a chocolate bar for Katy. Physically, Janis was striking. Unusually tall for a woman, she had wavy brown hair and disturbingly intense eyes. Her clothing was unlike anything Annie had ever seen: a glimmering, shiny white blouse that was not silk, and navy blue trousers like a man's!

Katy quit squirming when Janis gave her the candy. Annie looked up expectantly.

"I have a proposition for you," Janis said, extending a closed hand to her. Her accent was somehow foreign; American maybe. God knows Annie had had enough dealings with foreigners to recognize the sound, even the smell, of them. They filtered down through the lowest layers of society and ended up at the very bottom in Whitechapel. The East End was a magnet for the poor, the diseased, the helpless.

"What?" Annie demanded, dropping the *h* and pronouncing it *wot*, "you ain't payin' me this time? I'll tear out yer hair, I will—"

The doctor grinned. "On the contrary. . . ." She opened her hand, revealing several coins. Annie's eyes widened in astonishment. "There's twenty pounds here," Janis said, "sterling."

Twenty quid!

It was an amazing sum of money, more than Annie had seen in one place in her entire life. "What's it for?"

"I want to buy your daughter from you."

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"You want to *buy*—?"

Janis waved off her protest. "If Katy stays here, she'll grow up to be a whore just like you. She deserves better. I'll take her to a place where her life will mean something. She'll never have to lift her skirts for anyone unless she wants to."

It was the closest Annie had ever come to moral indignation. She lurched to her feet and slapped Janis's hand, scattering the coins across the floor. "I might be just a whore," she cried, "but you can go to hell and be damned if you thinks I'm sellin' me girl!"

Janis nodded, never losing her smile. "If you change your mind. . . ."

Annie snatched up her child and bolted toward the revolving door, casting one lustful glance at the coins before she spun out into the street.

2.

It was raining in Whitechapel. Mary Kelly sat on wet pavement, leaning against a wall in an alley behind Ringer's pub, her knees hugged up to her chin. She was crying; red lines of rouge streaked under her eyes.

The bells of St. Jude's struck eleven.

The alley's entrance was framed in the yellow glow of a gas lamp. Mary gasped at the shadow stumbling toward her, then sighed when she saw it was only her friend Annie, holding her petticoats off the ground to avoid puddles.

"Mary, love, is it you?" Annie called with a giggle. "I was worried. I can't see; is that you hidin' in the dark?"

Mary sniffled. "'Tis."

Annie shook water off her garments. "What're you doin' all curled up in a ball? It's raining; you'll ruin yer dress. Come back to the pub."

Mary lowered her forehead to her knees. Straggles of brown hair fell off her neck, exposing her skin to cold November air.

"Shouldn't be out here like this," Annie scolded. "Ain't safe bein' a woman alone. Where's the gentleman you left with?"

Mary buried her face in a handkerchief.

Annie knelt and draped her arm over Mary's shoulder. "Did the bastard hit you, love?"

"No."

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"Tell me why you're cryin'."

Mary wiped her nose. "Me landlord's been wantin' his doss money, and I haven't any. Joe tries to find work, but there's none. . . ." Her Irish accent was a musical counterpoint to her unhappiness, to the darkness. "The gentleman said he'd give me money — and buy me a hat, too, for Lord Mayor's Day. Only, he wanted to do it right here, standin' up against the wall."

"That's called a knee-trembler, m'dear. It's the best way. Then you don't have to lay down in the filth, and besides, it's quicker. You won't waste the whole bloody night on one bloke; you can go and find another."

"Oh Annie, he hurt me! I was so dry, and he was in such a hurry. Pushed me against the bricks so hard, he did, I had to bite me lip to keep from screamin'. He gave me the money, but said I wasn't worth a hat."

Annie hugged Mary's face to her breasts. "You wasn't meant for whorin', love. Let me tell you a little trick I know. It's easy. While yer gentleman's unbuttonin' his trousers, get some spit on yer fingers. Lift up yer dress like you're gettin' ready for him, then rub the spit on the inside of yer thighs." She winked and pushed Mary's petticoats out of the way to show her the exact spot. "You gotta squeeze yer legs together just right, but you never have to let him inside you. Big, stupid things, men are —with all the petticoats between you, he'll feel somethin wet and warm and never know the diff'rence. Moan a lot, then reach down and give him a bit of a tickle. Beg him not to come; tell him he's the best you ever had. It'll be all over in a minute."

Mary laughed and put her handkerchief in her coat pocket. "I'm not a very good whore, am I, Annie?"

Annie ruffled her hair. "Pretty girl like you? Pah! Nuffin' to it, just gotta learn the tricks, is all. Then you can make yer livin', and you won't get put off the street with a soddin' baby in yer belly."

Mary started to weep again. "Too late for that," she said. "Me courses haven't come for three months. Joe forbids whorin', but he can't pay the rent either, so what can I do? He don't come to me bed anymore, so he'll know he's not the father. He'll beat me when he finds out."

"Mary, girl, what am I to do with you? Don't you even use a sponge?"

"I did! But it didn't work."

"Well, then," Annie said philosophically. "That happens sometimes, love. Don't worry, I think I know somebody what'll be able to get rid of the

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thing for you. Joe don't ever have to know. Now, let's go back to the pub." She stroked Mary's hair, then rose and offered a hand. "Up with you now, m'dear. Sittin' on the street ain't dignified for two such fine ladies as us. There must be some gentlemen in the Ringer's what'll buy us a pint."

Mary peered up at her friend. "And a hat for the celebration?"

Annie snorted with glee. "And a hat!"

As Mary stood and smoothed out her clothes, Annie discovered the front of her own tattered coat was smeared with Mary's rouge. She pursed her lips in a mock pout. "Look what you've done to me pretty coat."

Mary cleared her throat and jutted her chin out. "Madam, I shall purchase a new one for you if only you'll accompany me to the ball."

Annie curtsied. "Sir, I would be honored."

Giggling, they locked arms and strolled out of the alley.

The pub was called the Ten Bells. It was always crowded, gloomy, and clogged with the stink of Whitechapel. A few other whores were there, but most customers were men, laborers in dirty clothes who clustered in small groups to talk and argue. Mary and Annie sat down in two empty chairs at a table of costermongers. The men briefly stopped their discussion to look at them, then went on as if they weren't there.

Annie nodded toward the other women in the pub and said to Mary, "Look at them old hags. We're the prettiest ones here."

One of the men snarled at her. "In five years you'll look just like 'em or worse."

"And in five years you'll still be payin' to sleep with grandmothers 'cause yer wife's got too much sense to let you near her."

The man reddened and clenched his fists, but his friends just laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. He shrugged, swigged his beer.

Mary listened to the snatches of conversations while watching a game of darts across the pub. Some of the talk concerned the upcoming Lord Mayor's Day celebration, some the Irish Home Rule question, but most of it centered on the same dreary subject that had preoccupied the East End since August.

". . . a demon, I say, the way he does it right under everybody's noses. What he does to them women—and with the coppers not ten feet away! It's like he's a ghost no one can see. 'Cept the whores; they sees him, all right!"

"Ain't the regular coppers what's the problem; it's their boss, Warren.

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You know them two bloodhounds he got? Tested 'em in Hyde Park, with himself as the rabbit. The damned dogs tracked him down, all right, and they bit him!"

Findin' a man in a park is one thing; findin' 'im on city streets is another."

"I hear tell he's dead."

"Who, Warren?"

Laughter from that corner of the pub. "No, *him*."

"Jacky? Ha! 'E not only ain't dead, I'm tellin' ya, 'e ain't through wif 'is work yet."

"Maybe Mr. Lusk can do somethin'." A woman's voice.

A man, scornfully: "Lusk is more a fool than Warren. 'Im and 'is bloody vigilance committee! Shit, that Marxist barstid couldn't find 'is own arse if 'e was sittin' on it!"

Two off-duty policemen, still in uniform, sat at the bar. One was shaking his head violently. "Dammit, John, just because he kills women doesn't mean he's a woman hater!"

"He sure as hell don't like 'em very much," said the second. "You forget, I'm the one who found the Nichols woman's body in Buck's Row. I *saw* what he did to her. Didn't just kill her; he cut her up bad. And the ones since have been worse, from what I hear. Took out their privates. Now, if that's not hatin' women, I don't know what is. . . ."

Mary looked away from them and trembled. "Is there nothin' else they can speak of?"

Annie squeezed her hand. "What is it, m'dear? This Ripper talk scarin' you?"

"Aren't you afraid?"

"Sometimes, but you can't waste yer life worryin' over it."

"I do, though. I can't help it."

A rough-looking man in a leather apron brushed past them.

Annie scratched her eyebrow. "Why don't you leave Whitechapel?" It was unthinkable, of course: no woman ever left Whitechapel unless she had money and somewhere else to go. And if she *did* have those things, she wouldn't have been in Whitechapel in the first place.

Mary shook her head. "Perhaps someday," she said with false cheer.

A man at the table cocked his head at Mary. Noting her accent, he made a spitting sound. "Fuckin' Irish pig. Go 'ome to yer pope. Better still, sidle up to old Saucy Jack. 'E'll know wot to do wif the likes o' you!"

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"Piss off," Mary said.

"'Fraid of Jacky, eh? Ain't met me a bleedin' 'ore yet wot ain't foulin' 'er bloomers at every mention of 'is name: But wot does they do? They walks right up to 'im 'n' lets 'im cut out their throats!"

"There must be a million people in the East End," Annie said, "and only one of 'em's the Ripper. A girl's gotta work."

"'E's a soddin' 'ero, I say. Nobody ever thought of us down 'ere till Jacky showed up. Now they're fallin' all over theirselves to 'elp us. So 'e rips a few 'ores; wot does that matter?" The man took a piece of paper from his coat. "D'ya see this in the *Times*? It's a letter to George Lusk. From *'im*. Says, 'Sir, I send you 'alf the kidney I took from one woman, preserved it for you. 'Tother piece I fried 'n' ate. It was very nice. I may send the bloody knife that took it out if only you wait a w'ile longer.' It was address from 'ell." His eyes glinted. He bared his teeth and lunged at them. "I'm Jack the Ripper! Bet you got tasty kidneys!"

Mary jumped back, almost toppling her chair. Color drained from her face.

Annie slapped the table in anger. "'Tisn't funny! Those're people he's killin', not animals!"

"Since w'en is 'ores people?" the man jeered.

"I knew some of them," Mary said quietly.

"Oh, sure," he snorted, "I knew 'em, too. Ever'body knows ever'body in W'itechapel, 'n' nobody knows nobody—'n' you don't know nuffin' at all! So just shuts yer bleedin' flap."

Annie stood up. "I'd claw off yer balls, if you had any." She swatted the man's beer glass into his lap.

Enraged, he grabbed the front of her dress and hit her in the eye with his fist. She fell, and he pounced on top of her, pinning her shoulders with his knees. "Ya owes me a beer, slut."

Annie panted under his weight. His friends watched with amusement.

"All right, you," one of the policemen said, "Up. Leave her be."

"She threw beer on me."

"You probably deserved it. Up."

Cursing, the man got to his feet, grinding his knee into Annie's chest as he did so. She lay on her back and glared at him.

"Do you want to bring a complaint against this man?" the officer asked.

Annie rolled to all fours, still between the man's legs. With a quick

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flick of her hand, she grabbed his crotch and squeezed hard. He yowled and bent over double.

"Mmmm," she said, darting out of reach, "he does have balls. No, I don't wanna make no complaint."

The officer smiled and restrained the man from coming after her again. "Best move along, then."

"Slut!" the man screamed. "Git yer Irish pig outta me sight; she's stinkin' up the place!"

It was nearly closing time, and most of the people were leaving the pub. Mary and Annie followed them out.

"What kind of man," Annie fumed, "carries a thing like that round to scare helpless women with?"

Mary leaned against a lamppost, looked up as rain fell through its soft sphere of light. "Annie, I'm so frightened."

"I know you are, love. That was nasty, what the bastard did. He's like all men; he don't understand what it's like bein' a woman. It's all a big joke to them, but they ain't the ones dyin'."

"I can't help thinkin' sometimes, what if it was me? What if the Ripper chose me instead?"

Annie stroked her hair. "No, no, my love, don't say that. You only make it worse. There's so many things to be scared of down here; the Ripper's just one more." She paused, then clapped her hands together. "I've an idea! Come stay with me tonight. You ain't seen me place over in Goulston Street yet, and if Joe don't sleep with you anyway, he won't miss you this one time. We'll walk arm in arm and not take any more gentlemen this evenin', and in the mornin' we'll go to Petticoat Lane and find you a hat."

"Aye, I'd like that. Thank you."

Unevenly spaced gas lamps made the streets a patchwork of light and shadow. The women avoided the gutters where everybody dumped their sewage. Mary watched her breath disappear into the night.

Neither spoke until Annie said, "Ever do any whorin' before you come to London?"

"No, never. I used to be married."

"Married! When?"

"In Wales after me family left Ireland. I was sixteen."

"What's it like, bein married?"

"Not much different than not bein' married, I guess."

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"Where's yer husband?"

"Killed in a mine accident."

"Sorry, love, didn't mean to upset you. . . ."

Mary shrugged. "Eight years is a long time. Worse things have happened since then." She waved her hand absently, indicating Whitechapel. "Me father bein' dead then, I'd nowhere to stay—"

"You and me is like sisters!" Annie blurted. "That's how I got to Whitechapel, too. . . . But that ain't so strange, is it? Nobody *means* to live here."

"— so when I first came, I lived with the nuns in St. Jude's."

That stopped Annie cold. "*You*, livin with nuns?" She hooted with laughter.

"Funny, ain't it? But they found me some real work over in the West End, in Cleveland Street. I posed for an artist once who took me to Dieppe, called me 'Marie Jeanette' instead of Mary Jane. But he got into some trouble, and that ended. I didn't like France anyway, so I came back here and moved in with Joe at Miller's Court. I used to be a respectable girl; now look at me."

"You gonna marry Joe?"

"What for?"

They turned a corner, cut through an alley to another street. Some men were herding cattle into a slaughterhouse.

The clip-clop of a hansom cab approached from behind them. They stepped aside to let it pass. Instead, the driver pulled up on the reins. His horse nickered and pranced. "Slow night, ladies," he said, tipping his hat. "Wouldn't be needin' a ride in this orful weather, wouldja?"

"No," Annie said, "we're almost home."

The man tipped his hat again and smiled, gaslight reflecting off his teeth. "Good mornin' to you, then." He shook the reins, and horse and carriage clattered down the street.

Mary hugged her arms around her chest. "I see the Ripper in every face I meet."

Annie sighed. "Come along, love."

They arrived at Goulston Street. The buildings that lined both sides were a jumble of red and brown brick held together with crumbling mortar. Rain caught pieces of light and glittered on the walls. "Here we are," Annie announced. "At least it's better than the Common Houses."

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She led Mary down wooden steps. "Careful, the third one's broke."

Hinges creaked as she pushed open the door at the bottom. Stale air rushed out to greet them, heavy with the smells of human filth, smoke, and fish. There was only one room, a basement kitchen. A line of laundry stretched across it, still dripping onto the floor. Across from the stairs stood an old wooden cabinet, its four shelves cluttered with dishes and pots. Annie's cat crouched there, batting at a rat that had wedged itself between a skillet and the rusted spout of a teakettle. The eyes of hunter and prey alike glowed green in the murky light that seeped in under the door.

Rags had been stuffed into the window to stave off cold. On a single shelf above the bed was a halfpenny candle and three headless fish partially wrapped in newspaper. The cat hadn't got at those yet.

Annie lit the candle, let the match drop to the floor. It landed in a puddle and fizzled.

A small girl slept on the floor against the far wall, out of the way of the dripping laundry, while a boy of ten pissed into an overflowing chamber pot in the opposite corner of the room. He looked at them and smiled. "Hullo, Annie, have you any cachous for me?"

"Sorry, love, no money today. I brought me friend Mary."

"Hullo," the boy said, buttoning his trousers.

"Hello."

"This is me brother, William," Annie said. She pointed to the sleeping toddler. "And that is me own little daughter, Katy."

"I didn't know you had a child," Mary said. Then, teasingly: "Where was *your* sponge?"

Annie's cheeks reddened. "I learned the hard way, too. Ah, but she's an angel."

Beside the stairs an empty bed tilted toward the wall. One of its legs was missing and had been replaced with a wooden peach crate.

"Empty the pot," Annie said to William. "We have a guest."

The boy sneered, but carried the chamber pot up the stairs, its contents sloshing out with each step. When he returned, he tossed it into its corner and wiped his hands on his shirt.

Annie nodded. "Where's Mum?"

William lay down on the floor and yawned, pulling a piece of burlap over himself for a blanket. "She brought a gentleman home. They fucked,

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and she went away with him."

"Then we shall have the bed tonight!" Annie giggled. She plopped onto the mattress, raising dust. "Come, Mary, let's huddle 'neath the covers!"

They quickly stripped off their coats, dresses, and petticoats, then put the dresses back on. They piled the coats and petticoats on top of the blanket and nestled close together, waiting for the bed to get warm.

Only their heads poked out of the covers. "What'll Joe say when you don't come home tonight?" Annie asked. "I mean, will it be all right?"

"He can say whatever he likes about that; I don't care. But he'll go wild when he finds out why I'm always sick in the mornin'. He really thinks I ain't walkin' streets anymore."

"And I told you, don't worry. I know this doctor over in the Minories what'll be able to get rid of the thing. Then nobody but us will even know it was there."

A bedbug crawled across the covers in front of Mary's nose.

They heard an angel crying. Annie hopped out of bed and picked up her daughter. The little girl's hair was tousled and matted to her face. Annie carried her to the corner, where she lifted the child's dress and squatted her over the chamber pot. When she was done, Annie broke off a piece of French bread that was lying on the cabinet and gave it to her.

Katy threw it down, refusing to eat.

Annie rocked her in her arms. The girl quit crying and tilted her head toward Mary, smiling at the stranger in her grandmother's bed. Her eyes twinkled; she pointed.

Mary untangling her coat from the pile of clothes and removed her handkerchief from its pocket. She offered it to the girl. "Take this, little one."

Katy thought the cloth was a toy. She wrapped and unwrapped it around her hand.

"Sleep now, me darlin'," Annie cooed. Delighted by the pretty material, the child lay down on the floor without another sound.

"She's three," Annie said when she returned to bed, "almost four. Most the time I can't get her to stop talkin'."

"She'll be a lovely lass when she grows up," Mary said. "Why don't you let her sleep up here with us?"

"I don't want her to get used to it."

Mary shifted uncomfortably, stared at the ceiling. "Do you ever

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wonder what'll become of her?"

Annie recalled the conversation she'd had with the lady doctor at the clinic. "I know what'll become of her. She'll be just like me."

Mary slid her hand down her still-flat stomach. "Do you think this might be a little girl, too?" Tears trickled down her cheeks and into her hair. She tried to blink them away.

"You ain't gonna start yer weepin' again, are you, love?"

"I hate this place."

Annie brushed Mary's hair off her forehead, kissed her eyelids. "Livin' don't have to be so horrible, Mary. Don't cry."

Annie's eye was swelling, discoloring slightly toward purple. Mary touched it gently. "That man in the pub hurt you—"

"Shhh, it's nothing."

Annie kissed her softly on the lips, then harder. She moved her hand over the bodice of Mary's dress.

"Annie, no. . . ."

"It's love, m'dear, and any love's a precious thing in Whitechapel."

3.

By morning the sky had cleared, but Mary felt too sick to fight the crowds at Petticoat Lane. After she left for Miller's Court, Annie decided to go to the Market alone. Usually she took Katy, but today she needed money, and a child was a definite hindrance to business. Though Sunday morning was not a good time for turning tricks, she managed quite well by picking pockets. Petticoat Lane spanned several city blocks and always bustled with people eager to part with their money (one way or the other). Annie obliged them. She quickly spent every farthing so that no one could pick *her* pocket, buying sweets to bring home for Katy and William. She also found a good bargain on a felt hat for Mary to wear on Lord Mayor's Day, which was the main reason she'd come.

When she got back shortly after noon, Katy was waiting in the street at the top of the stairs. The girl greeted her by jumping into her arms and slurping kisses all over her face. Annie gave her a sugar pastry.

"Is William here?" Annie said.

"No, but Grandmum is." Katy popped the pastry into her mouth.

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Annie took a deep breath, then carried her daughter down the steps. Her mother, Polly, was leaning on the cabinet, tapping her fingers angrily. She glowered at them as they approached. Annie knew by her expression another argument was brewing. They'd had at least one screaming row every day since Janis had offered twenty pounds to buy Katy. Annie loved a good shouting match, but this was getting tiresome, and she wished she'd never mentioned it. She steadied herself for the fight.

"Was ya at the clinic today?" Polly demanded.

Annie waved the hat at her. "Does it *look* like I was at the clinic? Can you get one of these at a soddin' hospital?"

"Don'tcha be smart with me; I'm yer mother. Ya know wut I mean. We're penniless, livin' like vermin in this sewer. At least yer brother's out trying' to find us some money—"

Annie set Katy down, patted her on the head. "Mum, I ain't sellin' me girl, and that's the end of it—"

"Twenty quid!"

"—and I won't have you talkin' this way in front of her!"

"Oh, won'tcha now? Won'tcha now?" Polly slammed a dish to the floor for emphasis. "Oo's 'ouse is this, anyway? Ya think I'm the bleedin' queen? I can't feed ya forever! But twenty quid, now that'd fix us up nice, all right."

Katy went over to the far wall and lay down, turning her back to the two women as she always did when the yelling got loud. Annie put on a show of bruised indignation. "You'd sell yer own flesh and blood for money? When I was a child—"

Polly snorted. "Girl, w'en you was a child, if someone'd said that to me, I'd've carved ya up and fed ya to the cat if that's wut they wanted. We was never rich even w'en yer father was alive!" She paused. "Didja ever think maybe—*maybe*—Katy'd be better off someplace else? Well, didja?"

Annie stubbornly shook her head. She folded her arms across her chest. "No. Not without me."

"Are ya 'appy 'ere? I mean, ya can't *like* this shit 'ole."

"There *ain't* anywhere else, Mum, so it don't matter what I think of it." She sat down on the bed. "There're those what're worse off—"

"I'll throw ya out on yer goddamned arse," her mother shrieked. "I will!" She lowered her face right next to Annie's; her breath was fetid. "Git offa me bed. Don't think I don't know 'bout last night, 'cause William told me you was 'ere with another 'ore! Sleepin' with women wut don't even pay

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w'en there's men to be 'ad! Where's yer 'ead at? W'ile you was in 'ere playin', I was out workin' all hours just to keep us eatin'. And me an old woman!" She squinted suspiciously at the hat. "Didja steal that?"

Annie started to answer no, then thought better of it. If she told her she'd bought it, her mother would complain she'd wasted good money. "I took it offa some fat woman at Petticoat Lane."

"'Oo's it for?"

Annie blushed and gazed at her feet. "Mary," she said softly. Then, more defiantly: "Me dear friend Mary!"

"She's the one, is she? Mary's 'er name?"

Suddenly Annie remembered she'd promised to talk to the doctor about Mary's pregnancy. She rose, snatched Katy from the floor, and stormed toward the stairs. "I do have to go to the clinic now," she said, "but not for what you think. I'll tear your soddin' hair out if you ever ask me to sell me girl again."

"Bugger off," Polly called as Annie slammed the door.

The area known as the Minories was only a short jaunt from Goulston Street, near the Tower of London. But then, no place in the East End was very far from any other place. Brothels, slaughterhouses, pubs, and shops cluttered every street and alley, with a million impoverished people cramped inside them like fish in a bucket.

From the outside, Janis's clinic was just another brownstone building, as ugly and shabby as any other structure in Whitechapel. It used to be a warehouse to store smoked meat. Annie held Katy's hand as she pushed through a revolving glass door. The interior of the clinic was a striking contrast to the exterior; everything was clean and white and sterile. As always, the awful antiseptic smell made her swallow several times to keep from gagging. Katy started fussing as soon as she noticed it. This smell always meant pain for her.

Machines Annie couldn't fathom lined the walls. Indulging a rare spark of curiosity, she pushed a button on one that looked like a table with a lot of wires coming out of it. There was a menacing clicking sound, and then the receptionist rushed over and turned the machine off. Annoyed, he grumbled, "Do you have an appointment?"

"I come here every Sunday. . . ."

"And here you are again. How nice. Name?"

"Annie."

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He tapped his pencil against his clipboard. "Just Annie?"

"Harper," she said. "You don't remember me?"

"Do you have any idea how many of you people I see every day?" The distaste in his voice was noticeable even to Annie. He didn't wait for her reply. "And the girl?"

"Katy."

"She's your daughter?"

"Yes."

"The doctor will see you shortly. Wait there." He pointed to a wooden chair next to the examination room. "And don't touch anything."

Katy cried and struggled to get away as soon as Annie sat down. "No, love, it's all right. I'm not gonna let her take you."

After a few minutes, a thin man of about forty came out of the office. He looked to be very ill, but beamed a toothless smile at her. He thrust an open palm at her exultantly, displaying several coins. "Eh?" he said. "Eh?" With that he skipped out through the revolving door.

Annie knew what that money meant: there'd be one less child in Whitechapel after today.

As soon as the man was gone, the receptionist lowered his head and spoke into a box with a metal grille on the front. "Janis, the Harper woman is back. The little girl, too."

Annie couldn't imagine why he'd be talking to a box. She struggled with the question briefly, then lost interest.

"The doctor will be with you as soon as she can," the receptionist told her.

Another ten minutes passed before Janis finally appeared and motioned them in. "Hi, Annie. Hi, Katy," she said, holding the door. "Sorry to keep you waiting."

Annie nodded, ushered her daughter in. "I ain't changed me mind; I want you to know straight off."

Janis raised an eyebrow at her. "That's fine," she said. "Sit down." She noted the bruise on Annie's eye. "What happened there?"

"Man in the Ten Bells hit me."

"Do you want treatment?"

"No."

"What can I do for you?"

Without preliminaries, Annie launched into her story. "I told a friend you could fix a little spot she's got herself into. She's an unfortunate like

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meself. . . ."

"And?" Janis bent over a luxurious wooden desk and took notes. She remained standing. Her height intimidated Annie.

"She ain't had her courses for three months—"

"She's missed three periods? Ah, and she thinks she's pregnant. In your line of work, that's an occupational hazard."

Katy fidgeted in Annie's lap. "But she can't keep the baby. Joe, who stays with her, forbids whorin,' but she does it anyway. He don't sleep with her, so he'll know he ain't the father."

"So?"

"He'll beat her if he finds out."

"Human relations in the 1880s," Janis muttered. "You're asking me to perform an abortion?"

"Yes."

"Gynecology isn't my specialty."

"Gyna-what?"

"-cology. Why not go to one of your local 'doctors'? I use the term loosely." She walked over to a cabinet for a bottle and a cotton swab. Pouring medicine onto the swab, she said, "Let me put some antiseptic on that eye." Before Annie could protest, Janis dabbed her bruise with the cotton.

"Ow!"

Katy started crying at her mother's show of pain.

Janis returned to her desk. "Tell me why I should help your friend," she said.

"'Cause I don't know no other doctors."

"All right, then, why should I do *you* any favors? You won't help me."

Annie jumped to her feet. "I told you, I ain't sellin' Katy!"

Janis held up her hands in a placating gesture. "I know, I know. Sit down. Does she want some candy?"

The little girl's eyes sparkled through her tears. Janis opened a drawer, took out a chocolate bar for her. Katy quit crying. "What is your friend's name?"

"Mary," Annie said, but then paused. Everybody used so many aliases in the East End. What was Mary's full name? "Well . . . Black Mary, some call her. Marie Jeanette. Sometimes Barnett, too. That's Joe's last name, but she ain't married to him. Mary, umm . . . ?"

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"Black Mary?" Janis looked like she was trying to remember something; then her face paled. "It wouldn't be Kelly, would it?"

"That's it. Do you know her?"

"I know of her, yes." Janis sat down with a thud. "I saw a photograph of her once. Ghastly. She's a friend of yours?"

"A photograph! I didn't know she had one took. Too bad she didn't wait for her hat. She'll look so pretty."

"Hat?"

"She wanted a hat to go watch Lord Mayor's Day over in the City next Friday, so I bought her one."

"Lord Mayor's Day! I'd forgotten that. . . ." Janis checked her wristwatch. O.K., today's the fourth, which makes Friday the ninth. That's the day, all right." She whistled glumly. "Mary won't need my services, Annie. She'll never carry to term."

Annie frowned. She knew what a miscarriage was, but not the word for it. "Is she sick?"

"No."

"She's gonna lose the baby, is she?"

The doctor nodded her head solemnly. "Oh yes. . . ."

Annie was not naturally intuitive, but she sensed there was something she wasn't being told. "How do you know that? Has she been here?"

Janis exhaled slowly. All she said was, "I know a lot of things. You might call it hindsight."

Hindsight? Annie stared at her while Katy munched on the chocolate. She felt uncomfortable. Even sitting down, Janis was imposing. Finally Annie said, "What should I say to Mary?"

"Nothing. I can't explain. You'll know what I mean on Friday."

"Then she don't need to worry bout Joe?"

"Not unless she tells him she's pregnant before then."

"Oh." Annie didn't know whether to believe her or not. But it was clear the doctor wasn't going to help Mary. She stood to go. When she saw how Janis eyed Katy, though, she stopped. She just had to ask. "What do you want with children?"

Janis seemed unsure how to respond. "Only children," she began, "with a special kind of blood." She picked up a scalpel with her left hand and tested its edge on her right thumb. A thin red line trickled out.

Annie was skeptical. "There ain't no special kinda blood. Blood is

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blood."

"Not so, Annie." She held up her thumb. The blood dripped down her wrist onto her watch. "See this? This is what keeps everybody alive. But Katy's does more. Hers can keep other people alive as well. I'm not talking about a transfusion. Her blood will prevent sickness, and that's very important where I come from."

Annie didn't understand.

"I don't know how to explain this to you," Janis said, but tried anyway. "Think of Katy's blood as a river. Rivers are made up of water, but there are other things in them besides water: fish, plants, bugs, tree limbs, maybe; oil, sewage; boats. . . . Right?"

Annie nodded. "Dead bodies, too."

"Yes, well. Katy's blood is like a river. Only, in addition to all the usual stuff that's in blood, hers carries a kind of medicine."

Suddenly Annie had a hundred questions, but Janis waved them off. "Listen, Annie. It's not just her blood. We not only need the medicine, we need to make sure we still have a viable breeding population when everything is over. We don't have many immunes back home, and we don't know how many nonimmunes we'll be able to save. So we have to bring in fresh genetic stock from somewhere else who, in a few years, can help to assure the survival of the species. I have reason to believe they'll pass on their immunity to future generations. I've seen it before. It'll be a germ-line solution without actually tampering with anybody's genes."

Annie frowned, shook her head. The doctor might as well be speaking in another language.

"Anyway," Janis continued, "I checked all the available records. The problem is that the best possible place to look is in the slums where the poor people live, because they were never going to affect the world anyway, so their loss wouldn't be noticed in history; but they're also the least likely to have medical documentation. And so we have to examine each person individually. Plus, the farther back we go, the more primitive the technology. Even if there are records, they're almost certain to be inaccurate. But we can't go forward, so we have to go back. We've exhausted our resources at home.

"Believe me, it would be much easier if a computer could just kick out a list of names and addresses. This whole business is a pain in the ass. It's time-consuming and probably isn't going to work anyway."

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"You don't hurt the children?"

"Haven't so far. Take a look around, Annie. Is this really how you want Katy to grow up? If she stays here, she'll become another drunken whore. No one will remember her when she dies."

"No one's gonna remember me when I die."

"And that's what you want for your daughter?"

"What I want is her. Who knows, maybe she'll marry a duke—"

"No, Annie, she won't. I *know*. She'll die a beaten old drab in a workhouse accident in 1911. Beaten, I say, and not even twenty-seven years old. She will be unmarried, a chronic drunk, a whore—"

Annie covered her ears. "No!" she shrieked. "Don't say no more! You can't know that; 1911 ain't even happened yet! You're just tryin' to frighten me so I'll let you have Katy." She wept into her hands.

"Annie." Janis spoke gently in her most persuasive voice. "I can make her life mean something. Can you hope for as much?"

Annie wiped away her tears. "Take me, too."

"I can't. Your blood is normal. Don't you see? You're not immune; you'd probably die before I could synthesize a vaccine—"

"Fine." Annie's fear gave way to defiance. "Then Katy stays. She's me girl, and I love her."

Janis abruptly stabbed the scalpel into her desk. A flash of light in her eyes made her look evil. "How can you love her and yet condemn her to Whitechapel? It's so goddamned selfish! If only you knew what Katy could mean to us. . . ."

A wild idea ran through Annie's mind. It horrified her. She stared at Janis. The woman knew how to handle a knife. There were rumors in the East End, rumors about a doctor who sometimes came out at night. But a *lady*? Annie took Katy's hand and retreated to the door. "Bloody Christ, you're not the Ripper—?"

Janis only laughed, jerked the scalpel from the wood, and lay it on her desk. "No. But I know who is."

4.

Mary got to the Ten Bells just before midnight on Thursday night, bedraggled from the rain. She wore a red scarf over her hair, tied in a knot at her throat, and a black shawl over her shoulders.

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Annie and a gentleman friend sat at a table in the back of the pub.

"Mary!" Annie called, waving.

Mary nodded and joined them. "Stupid pissin' weather," she grumbled.

Annie didn't introduce her to the man. Instead, she said, "Close your eyes. I have somethin' for you."

Mary did so, then sat fidgeting in her chair. "What is it? What is it?" She heard a rustling of paper as Annie took a package from beneath the table.

"You can look now, love."

Mary opened her eyes. Annie was smiling, holding a fine black hat made of felt, with satin strings.

"Oh Annie, I love you! Where'd you get it?"

"After you left Sunday, I went to Petticoat Lane. Had to pick a lot of pockets to buy this."

"You didn't!" Mary put the hat on, squinted at her image in the dirty mirror behind the bar. "I can't see a bloody thing. How do I look?"

"You look lovely," Annie said. The gentleman agreed.

Mary beamed her best smile at her friend, gazed into her eyes, hugged her. "Thank you. This is very nice."

"Pah." Annie propped her feet up on an empty chair, took a sip of gin.

Mary was giddy, moving the hat this way and that on her head.

"Where's Joe tonight?"

"I don't know." She unwrapped the scarf and wiped rouge off her cheek, uncovering a bruise.

"Ah," Annie said, "he found out 'bout the baby."

"Aye, and moved away. To Bishopsgate, I think."

Annie frowned, scratched her ear. "Do you know any lady doctors?"

"*Lady* doctors? Ain't any lady doctors I ever heard of."

"Oh. I talked to one Sunday, seemed like she knew you."

"Is she gonna take care of the baby? Too late now: Joe's gone."

"She says you won't need her to take care of it, says you're gonna lose it anyway."

"How could she know a thing like that?"

"Did you ever get a photograph took of you?"

"No. I did have that artist paint me." Losing interest, Mary changed the subject. "I haven't any money, Annie, and my landlord wants his rent. Do you suppose your gentleman would like to have the two of us tonight? Just a sixpence extra."

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The man held up his hands in a helpless gesture. "I've spent it all keeping Annie in drink."

Annie frowned. "If you was really a gentleman, you'd give me drinks for free. I wouldn't have to fuck for them."

The man laughed. "If I was a gentleman, I wouldn't be sittin' here with you, now, would I?"

"Well, then," Mary sighed. "No escape from whorin'. But I have a pretty new hat, and all the men will run to me." She got up and draped the scarf around her neck. "I must go and find some money. Good night. Thank you, Annie."

She approached several men in the pub before finding one who was interested. He was a stout fellow with ragged clothes and a billycock hat. They quickly agreed on a price, and Mary left with him, smiling at Annie as she passed.

Outside, she said, "Where shall it be, love? Do you want to come to my house?" No reason not to; Joe was no longer there to stop her. "Or shall we have a little fun and do it right here?"

"Under the light? In the rain?"

"No we'll go down the alley. It's dark there, and we can do it up against the wall where the rain won't bother us."

She ran into the alley, and he followed. Leaning against the wall, she spread her legs a bit and started to hike her dress up. "Hurry, love, I can't wait!"

The man grinned. While he unbuttoned his trousers, Mary touched her fingers to her mouth and then with the same hand brought her dress the rest of the way up. He grasped her buttocks and clumsily tried to enter her. She guided him with her hand, flexed her thigh muscles. Her dress and petticoats were flattened between them.

"There you go, love. You're in."

His breath smelled of whiskey and fish. Mary put her chin on his shoulder and bit her lip to keep from giggling. After a few moments, she reached down and gave him a squeeze. "You're so good—please, please wait for me!"

The man shuddered and jerked, then backed away. "Sorry," he said, "I don't usually, I mean—"

"Shhh," Mary cooed, touching her fingers to his lips. "It's all right, love. It was very nice."

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She kissed him lightly on the cheek. He smiled a nervous smile, gawked at his feet, tipped his hat. "Spend the night with me?" he said, pressing a coin into her palm. He looked up and stared at her with sad eyes.

Mary smiled, took his hand in hers. "Can't, love. You should go home to your wife."

The man shook his head. "Wife's dead, ten years now."

"We're all lonely down here," Mary said gently. She dropped the coin into her pocket. "Now go home, and maybe we'll see each other again."

"Good evening, then," the man said.

She watched him walk away, slowly at first while he buttoned his trousers, and then more quickly. She frowned, waited till she couldn't see him anymore, then came out of the alley. The pub was closed. Annie and her friend were gone. Mary looked for them, but soon gave up and strolled down the wet, dark street, whistling an Irish tune.

Her new hat was getting rained on.

For over an hour, she flitted from gas lamp to gas lamp, building to building, searching for customers in the faces of people she met. Even at this hour, life went on in Whitechapel. There were butchers and policemen, cabdrivers and whores. Down one street a group of indigents huddled together on the pavement for warmth.

Mary turned onto Flower and Dean Street, which was surprisingly deserted. Footsteps approached from behind her; a man tapped her on the shoulder. He was a fairly young man, well dressed for someone in the East End, and good-looking too. They haggled over price, and she agreed to take him to her room.

It was well past midnight, Friday the ninth.

5.

The inquest was held at the Shoreditch town hall.

Annie wore her best dress. She sat rigidly on the hard-backed chair, her lips clamped tightly together. She'd given her testimony.

Yes, she knew the deceased. They were great friends.

Yes, they were together Thursday night.

Yes, she'd given a felt hat to the deceased. Could have been the same one they'd found burned in her fireplace. It had been a present for Lord

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Mayor's Day.

No, the deceased had not mentioned being afraid of anyone in particular. Not that night, anyway.

The *deceased.* Annie looked around. Joe was on the other side of the room, crying. She didn't move a muscle as a police investigator explained how he'd found the body. "The fiend must've needed light to be about his work; that's all I can figure. The teapot by the fireplace was melted, but clothes and hats don't burn that hot. *Coal* don't burn that hot. It's like the fire came up from Hell itself. . . ."

He said the body had been photographed.

Annie had seen her at the mortuary. They'd sewn the pieces together and covered the body with a sheet to spare the jury an unpleasant spectacle. Even so, her face had been hacked beyond recognition.

Behind her a reporter from the *Times* was quietly badgering a coroner's assistant. "Is it true," he said, "that portions of the body are missing?"

"Where did you hear that?"

"Is it true?"

There was a pause. "No—well, maybe."

"What does that mean?"

"Damn you, man. Yes, one portion is missing. Just one. It wasn't anywhere in her room."

"What was it, the uterus, like Chapman and Eddowes?"

"Not exactly. The woman was three months' pregnant. He took the fetus. Don't print that; I'll deny it."

Annie squeezed her eyes shut, absently wrapping Katy's red handkerchief around her fingers. *Mary's* handkerchief.

Unable to contain her tears, she sprang from her chair and fled the inquest. She stared bitterly at the streets of the East End, at the unfair, crushing poverty that wore down even the strongest people. Janis was right: this was no way to live.

Annie would never escape Whitechapel.

But her daughter would.

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Jared Taylor also takes a familiar fictional theme and makes it new. "Tales from the Arabian Nights," translated by Richard Francis Burton, is a must-read for most storytellers. And most storytellers feel that they can't compete with the book's heroine, the incomparable Scheherazade, who saved her own life by being entertaining. Taylor takes on both Burton and Scheherazade in this charming contemporary fantasy about a man who discovers the collectable of a lifetime.

The Tale of the Two Queens

By Jared Taylor

MOKHTAR ENTERED THE room silently, carrying a tray on which he had laid out the day's mail. He set down the tray on the low table next to the armchair and, catching my eye, bowed slightly and withdrew. The mail was always a pleasant distraction after a morning spent translating the mystic poetry of the 17th century Caliph, Shayk al-Bahr, but I finished a stanza before I got up from my desk and sank into the cool leather of the armchair.

Most of the mail was correspondence forwarded by the university, from which I always escaped during the second semester to Baghdad. One letter, however, was of local origin. It did not bear a stamp, and must have been delivered by messenger that morning. I turned the envelope over and

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saw that it was from Ahmed Basim, the antique dealer whose shop on Al-Rashid Street I sometimes looked in on when I had business at the consulate. Basim, who was as old as most of his merchandise, never bothered with telephones and always sent a note when he found something he thought I might buy.

Your Excellency, the letter began. (Everything about Basim was antique.) An article of great interest has come into my possession, with respect to which I invite your Excellency's perusal. I must suggest that your Excellency refrain from delay in this matter, for the article in question is of such curiosity that even those with none of your Excellency's cultivation in such matters cannot fail to note its worth. I remain, with respect, your humble etc.

I could hardly suppress a chuckle. Nothing ever stayed in Basim's shop for less than three months, and most of the daggers and dusty parchments that cluttered the place had been there for years. I tossed his letter into the waste basket and went back to the poetry of Shaykh al-Bahr.

A month or so later I was called to the Consulate and asked to take an advisory position on some pointless cultural commission. I managed to elude responsibility without giving offense, and it was with relief that I stepped out into the bright sunlight for the walk home.

My route took me across Al-Rashid Street and when I reached the corner I recalled Basim's letter. I had not puttered in his shop for some time and, suddenly curious to know what sort of trinket had prompted him to write me, turned and made my way through the twisting street.

As I stepped into the shop, the floor groaned beneath my foot, where a rotted board had been patched with a piece of tin. As always, there were no other customers to be seen. After a moment my eyes grew accustomed to the dimness and I made out Basim's familiar form, squatting on a tasseled cushion behind a table littered with amber pendants and carved ivory. His face was ridged with wrinkles and once again I marvelled at how a man who sat all day in the dark could have so weathered a complexion. He was gently puffing on a hookah that sat in a tray on the floor, and he eyed me with what seemed to be amusement.

"Peace be upon you," he said when he was sure that I could see him.

"And upon your household," I replied.

Basim rummaged in the darkness under his table and pulled out another cushion, which he set down across from the hookah. He gestured

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to me to be seated, and as I slipped out of my sandals he called for his boy and asked for tea. We sat across from each other for a moment, while he puffed at his hookah. Our tea arrived and we chatted about mutual acquaintances in the antiquities trade before I brought up the subject of his letter.

"I understand you have acquired something you think might interest me."

"Would it interest you," he replied, "to know that a Frenchman has already offered me one thousand dinars for this article?"

For a thousand dinars I could have bought half this shop. It was an enormous sum. "Not at all," I said, "until I had examined the article in question."

Once again Basim called for his boy and murmured a few words. The boy returned with a flat package wrapped in a white silk cloth. Basim removed the cloth and withdrew a leather portfolio with the initials R.F.B. stamped in gold on the cover. I took the portfolio in my hands. It was clearly of European workmanship and could have been no more than a hundred years old. I opened it and found a dozen pages of heavy rag paper. The first was a title page, at the top of which the words "The Tale of the Two Queens" had been penned in a bold, calligraphic hand.

"This is European," I said, closing the portfolio, "and of no interest to me."

A glint of amusement returned to Basim's eyes. "Turn to the last page," he said.

It was the conclusion of the text, written in the same bold hand, and ran nearly to the bottom of the page. I drew a quick breath at the words in the lower right hand corner: Richard Francis Burton. London, 1884.

Burton was the famous adventurer who had translated the Tales from the Arabian Nights. I had seen his signature on documents in the British Museum. Still, there were several manuscript versions of Burton's translation, and though collectors have bid up their price, there was not a single tale that had ever sold for one twentieth the price Basim had quoted me.

As if he had guessed my thoughts, Basim spoke. "Have you read all the Arabian Night's Tales?"

Burton's translation runs to fifteen volumes. "No, I have not."

"If you had, you would know that none has the title, 'The Tale of the Two Queens.'"

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"What?" Do you mean to say that this is the missing manuscript?"

"I have every reason to believe that it is," said Basim, "and so does the Frenchman . . ."

In the celebrated Terminal Essay with which Burton concludes his fifteenth volume, he writes of what he calls the Thousand and Second Tale, a tale which, he adds, for reasons of his own, he did not include in an otherwise exhaustive translation. Scholars have searched in vain for an untranslated portion of the original Arabic. Most have concluded that the reference is nothing more than a joke at the reader's expense, but a small band of Burton loyalists has argued that there must be such a tale, even if Burton wrote it himself rather than translate an original text which has since been lost. If what I held in my hands were the missing tale, it would be very valuable. I looked up at Basim.

"It would be tiresome for you to examine the document here," he was saying. "Please take it with you and study it at your convenience."

"That is very generous of you."

"However, I must set two conditions."

"Of course."

"First, you must promise that you will not make a copy of the text. You will recall that it was never published. Second, the Frenchman will return in one week with money in hand. I do not wish to disappoint him. I would, of course, be pleased to entertain an offer from your Excellency." Amusement glinted in Basim's eyes.

"Sir Richard was, like your Excellency, an Englishman," he went on. "In all respect I feel sure that he would have preferred that his work return to England rather than fall into the hands of foreigners."

"Perhaps so. I will study the document and return it within a week."

I rose to go but Basim laid a hand on my sleeve. "And the first condition?"

"By all means. I give you my honor that I will not make a copy."

"It is always a pleasure to deal with the English," he said. "I required the Frenchman to read the document in my presence."

Basim wrapped the portfolio in its cloth and slipped on his sandals to accompany me to the door. "It is a curious tale," he said, pointing to the package in my hands. "It begins where Burton's tales leave off — a kind of epilogue."

He bid me farewell and once again I stepped out into the sunlight.

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As I walked down the dusty streets toward home I tried to remember the setting of the Arabian Nights' Tales. A certain King Shahryar and his brother, likewise a king, had become so embittered by the adultery of their wives that they had devised a foolproof method to ensure faithfulness. Each night they would take to wife one of the virgins of the kingdom and in the morning have her executed.

This grisly practice appears to have gone on for some time until a beautiful, courageous and well-read lass named Scheherazade volunteered to be King Shahryar's bride. Her father was grief-stricken at the news, but Scheherazade had a plan to end the carnage. Her first night with the king, she spun him an extravagant tale of wazirs, jinni, trickery and enchanted fish, and left off at such a tantalizing point that the king had no choice but to let her live to the next night so that he might learn how the story ended.

This clever tale-telling went on for a thousand and one nights, apparently uninterrupted by the fact that Scheherazade is said to have borne the king three sons during this period. Eventually, of course, the king's misogyny waned and he agreed to accept Scheherazade as full-time wife and queen. I couldn't recall what the king's brother had been up to for all that time, but it appears that Scheherazade had a younger sister named Dunyazade, just as beautiful as she, who was married off to the brother in one of those symmetrical happy endings so popular in the Middle East. If The Tale of the Two Queens was an epilogue of some sort, it must recount the further adventures of Scheherazade and Dunyazade.

I was still musing on what these might be when I arrived home. I told Mokhtar I was not to be disturbed, cleared my desk of Shayk al-Bahr, and addressed myself to my new prize. Upon close examination, both manuscript and portfolio proved to be in excellent condition. It was as if Burton had drafted a final, clean copy, shut it carefully away, and never touched it again. Once again, I examined the signature. If the document was a forgery it was a masterful one.

I turned back to the first page and gave myself up to the elegance of Burton's antique prose. The tale was more than an epilogue; it was an alternative ending to the Scheherazade series that only the most cynical reader could have foreseen.

I sat in silence for some minutes musing on what I had read. I imagined with mounting amusement the confusion this document would sow

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among the Burton scholars. There would first be a raging battle over the authenticity of the manuscript. Then, if my guess proved right, and The Tale of the Two Queens was found to be in Burton's hand but of his own invention rather than a translation, there would be a torrent of scholarly speculation on the scabrous turn that Burton's mind must have taken in his old age. At the center of the whirlwind would, of course, be the man who had discovered the document.

I replaced the heavy sheets in their case, wrapped the lot in its silk cloth, and put it safely away in the locked drawer of my desk. I looked at the clock. There was just time enough to translate a dozen more stanzas from Shayk al-Bahr before tea.

Several days went by and I hardly gave the Burton tale a thought, as I was busy with visitors from England. An infernal round of receptions, teas and dinner parties kept me even from my own work. But by the time my guests had packed their bags and set off for Cairo, a decision had begun to take shape in my mind.

My reputation as an Arabist was secure. I had always been known for patient scholarship and dependable research. Never had I been associated with the undignified controversies that sometimes sweep the universities. Moreover, there was the matter of the thousand dinars. I would have gladly paid one quarter that amount for what was clearly a document of great historical curiosity, but to muster the sum Basim demanded would have required a reordering of my tidy finances.

There was nothing more to consider. I would leave the field to the Frenchman. My slight taste for controversy would be amply satisfied by a quiet evening with this soon-to-be-celebrated Frenchman, in which I would suggest to him how easily the document that had established his reputation might have slipped through his fingers. I would, nevertheless, take one precaution. . .

I returned to Basim's shop one day before the week was out and found him once again squatting in the darkness, his hookah at his side. I set down the silk-wrapped package and took my place on the cushion he offered me. We sipped tea and spoke at length of the shipment of spurious caliphate jewelry that had suddenly flooded the bazaars. Basim shook his head at the idiocy of anyone unable to distinguish bone from rhino horn and I confess that until only a few days earlier several such people had been my guests.

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"Of course," said the old man, as if the thought had never occurred to him before, "the foreigners would buy them."

Presently the conversation lapsed. Basim brushed the white silk with his fingertips. "And this, your Excellency? Did the tale amuse you?"

"It did, Basim, and I am honored that you should allow me to study it.

"It is my pleasure. And is your Excellency of a mind to acquire the article?"

"I am. But the Frenchman seems more of a mind than I. I regret that I cannot match his offer." The light in Basim's eyes seemed to fade, but I was looking into them so watchfully that my gaze might have disturbed him.

"Very well," he said. "Burton's work will come to rest in Paris rather than in London."

"I'm not sure it would disappoint him," I said. "Sir Richard was fond of Paris."

I stayed on for a few moments longer and let Basim overcharge me for an onyx signet ring that had once been worn by the chief chamberlain to Sultan Wazun of Aleppo. He saw me to the door and we bid farewell.

Eleven years have passed since I returned the Tale of the Two Queens to Basim's shop. For some months afterwards, whenever I opened an Arabist journal I expected to read some young Paris scholar's claim to have found Burton's missing manuscript, but no such paper was ever published. I returned from time to time to Basim's shop, where we sipped tea and talked of many things but never of the Tale of the Two Queens. I had thought that with profits from the sale of the manuscript he would surely replace the rotted plank at the entrance to his shop but each time I stepped in from the sunlight, it was to the creak of a patch of tin.

Two years ago, I retired from university and now amuse myself growing spices in a conservatory next to my cottage in Warwickshire. A year ago I learned from a younger colleague that Basim had died. His stock was bought by a well-known dealer from Cairo, and nothing of compelling interest was found.

I now feel free to tell the Tale of the Two Queens. I, like the Frenchman — if he ever existed — have let the original slip through my fingers. But I broke my word to Basim. The night before I returned the manuscript I copied it word for word.

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* * *

The Tale of the Two Queens

Thus did the two Kings, Shahryar and Shah Zaman abide in perfect harmony, each ruling the kingdom a day in turn. And the people rejoiced, giving thanks that affliction had been lifted from the virgins among them and that King Shahryar and Shah Zaman were freed from the cark and care of faithless wives. All who lived within the realm prospered an hundredfold, for there was no man whose olive groves were not dark with fruit, whose flocks and herds flourished not, and whose waters ran not cool and pure like the streams of paradise. For three years did feast and bounty thus continue, but no man, be he lord or lazar, can escape the fate that is his alone, and only Allah is All-knowing.

Now when one day, as Scheherazade and Dunyazade disported themselves in the Hammam baths, they chanced to talk of the noble brothers the twain had wed. Each boasted in turn of the lofty one who was her King, and each regaled the other with talk of the mighty works her master wrought among the scented cushions of the bedchamber. And in the telling each o'erstepped the bounds of truth, and the two sisters, Scheherazade and Dunyazade, were seized with longing to taste the delights the other spoke so fondly of.

And Scheherazade, the elder, summoned up her wit and, bidding the Hammam attendants to withdraw, hatched a plot with Dunyazade, whereby the two might know whereof the other spoke. All was soon contrived, and the queens repaired to their quarters, laughing girlishly at the cunning of their craft.

So it was that not a fortnight thereafter, there appeared before King Shahryar's court, a figure heavy-robed and veiled in the manner of an old woman, who made plain her wish to speak with her sovereign. Forthwith she was admitted to the throne and, with all eyes upon her, spoke in a faltering voice:

"O great and puissant King, I come in supplication before my lord with a plea I would reserve for thine ear alone."

"What matter is this," replied the King, "that my grandees and wazirs are not fit to hear of?"

"O Commander of the Faithful," said the woman, "it is a matter of little note to one so august as thou, but signifies the everlasting joy of thy

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maidservant. I beseech three, therefore, O King, to hear my plea and to vouchsafe to thy maidservant thy sole attention."

At this the King commanded the company to withdraw and, turning to the old woman, bade her draw near and speak. When the woman saw that she was alone with the King, she threw off her outer garments and lo, it was a maiden, graceful as a gazelle, who stood before the King in naught but films of gauze. Her beauty was like the full moon, her belly like a sheaf of wheat, and her breasts a temptation to behold, but her veil she kept upon her and the King knew her not.

When the King beheld the woman's loveliness, he well nigh swooned away from amorous desire and in a voice like honey said to her, "Speak, my child. Whatsoever thy heart desirest of me shall be thine."

"Know, O Monarch of the Firmament," replied the woman, "that I am the daughter of thy humblest but most devoted subject. Before his death there was none like him to keep thy law and to glorify thy name. But the shades o'ertook him when I was but a child, and he was gathered to his forefathers. I then became the ward of my father's brother, a whoreson knave of lowest sort who delights in nothing more than guile and mischievousness.

"This uncle, finding me comely, hast resolved to wed me to a wealthy man, a trader in ivory, incense and precious stones, and hopes thereby to fatten his coffers with my bride price. But this man, this trader, is a greasy lout with nose flabby like an eggplant, face like a cobbler's apron and lips like camels kidneys, loose and pendulous. In brief, a terror and a monster who hath no more charm than a dung beetle. In the temple of my heart there dwelleth instead a winsome youth of high birth who, though with gifts and faculties like unto a shining star, is a man of little wealth."

At this the King's brow knotted like a rope and he said unto the woman, "thou must know that no woman can wed without consent. This is the law of the Prophet — May his name be praised! — which no man, be he King or Emir, dare revoke."

"O noble King," said the woman, swaying gently to and fro with undulation like as to seduce a saint, "thy maidservant knows the law and all it signifies. It is not the law that I would change but my uncle's crass intent. It did once betide, O King, when I confessed my love for the youth and my disdain for the lout, that my uncle waxed wroth and rage was like to strangle him. My flesh, said he, were fit for a King's couch, and 'twere

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hopeless waste to squander it upon the penniless. Whereupon I seized upon his words and asked if he might free me from his will if the King, our lord, were to look upon me with favor.

"He then swore by the beard of the Prophet that on the day that I did lie with the King, betimes I would be free. Thus have I come before thee, O Monarch of the Ages, to request thy favor in holding this evil man to his covenant."

At this the King's heart leapt within his bosom and he would have futtered the lass forthwith, but restrained himself at the thought of his wazirs and grandees waiting upon him in the outer chambers with matters both weighty and pressing. And he spoke to the woman and said, "It pleaseth me to deliver thee from thy despair, O daughter of my Kingdom. This eventide when the moon is risen, return to the private gate in the East wall of the palace and knock thrice upon it. When the guard challengeth thee, say unto him that thou comest at the bidding of the King."

Then the lass came forward and prostrated herself before the king and taking his feet in her hands bathed them with tears of thanksgiving. "O Liege," said she, "blessed is thine handmaiden for the grace thou shedest upon her. But my evil uncle suspects my plan and watches my comings and goings. Six days hence he will be absent from his house and then it is that thy servant would beg favor of thee. E'en so, the youth who holds thy servant's heart in the palm of his hand is sickened and vexed that his lover should lie with so glorious a one as the King, in the perfumed splendor of the royal bedchamber. Thus have I sworn to him an oath neither to do this thing within the palace walls nor to show my face to our lord the King."

The woman then told of a bower in the shade of three fig trees where they might make assignation undiscovered. And the woman, whose ivory roundness at his feet was like a dagger in his heart, and whose scented body filled his nostrils with fire, prevailed upon the King and he granted all she wished. And she, rejoicing, kissed the ground before him, prostrated herself seven times, and donning her crone's clothing withdrew from the King's presence. The King, though striken with desire like unto the thirst of a desert wanderer, recalled his court and in good countenance performed his royal duties. But that night he tasted not the sweet food of sleep, so hotly did the fires within him burn.

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On the morrow Shah Zaman took his brother's place upon the throne and o'ersaw the business of the realm. And great was the astonishment of the assemblage when again a woman, veiled and dressed in robes of black, appeared and craved private counsel with the King. And again, when all wazirs and grandees had been banished from the room, the woman doffed her outer garments and stood before Shah Zaman, sweet as the gentlest zephyr, in youthful loveliness that smote his heart. She too recounted a tale of anguish and affliction that might only be set right by intimate attention from the king.

Now Shah Zaman was younger and more intemperate than his brother, and as quickly as the lass undraped her supple form his loins moved and straightaway did he rise to manful estate. He paid no heed to the tale she told and made to swive her then and there. But the woman, fearing to be discovered should the King partake of her treasure by light of day, restrained him, saying, "An thy wouldst have thy way with me, O King, it must needs be according to the mighty oath that I have sworn, for only thus may thy servant be released from grief and bondage." So saying, she covenanted with him to meet five days hence in a secret place beside a field of barley. When all was agreed and Shah Zaman had recomposed himself, she prostrated herself before him seven times and, resuming the habit of an old woman, withdrew.

The court was struck with wonderment at these aged creatures who sought to speak in seclusion with their kings, but the royal brothers kept their own counsel and none dared question them. Five days went by and none among the grandees and wazirs gave e'en a passing thought to these events but King Shahryar and Shah Zaman were restless for the days to pass.

When came at last the appointed night, each king arose, girded himself in dark disguise, and brimming with thoughts of amorous sport, set out for his appointed meeting place. And lo, their two queens arose after them and making haste to powder and perfume their bodies, likewise set out beneath the stars, for verily 'twas Dunyazade who had hocussed her sister's master, King Shahryar, with talk of evil uncles, and Scheherazade who had frolicked before Shah Zaman.

Now the two kings, though they thought Scheherazade and Dunyazade each to be that thing so dear and rare, a faithful woman, remembered still the wanton treachery of their former wives. Thus had each commanded a

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doughty Mameluke, honest as an ax handle, secretly to watch over his queen by night to see that she slipped not away for faithless trysting. And these good men, one armed with a scimitar of keenest Damascus, the other with a spear of seven cubits, followed unbeknownst as the queens hastened forth.

Presently Queen Dunyazade came upon the bower beneath three fig trees, and finding King Shahryar therein, the two fell upon each other with shouts of joy. Thereupon, the Mameluke drew nigh unto the bower and seeing the queen abandon herself to the most lascivious tupping and clipping, did as his king had commanded him and, drawing his scimitar, in one mighty blow cut the two in four pieces. Likewise, when the slave in whose charge Queen Scheherazade had been put came upon the secret place by the barley field and found her in the thoes of lust and lewdness, he lifted up his spear and drove it home with such force that the lovers were skewered to the earth, locked even as they were in carnal embrace.

When, upon the morrow, the people learned of the tragedy that had befallen their kings, they rent their garments and plucked their beards from their faces, saying. "Woe be upon us, for ours was a land of justice and prosperity, but now Allah has struck down our rulers and we have none to govern us." And the grandees and wazirs quarreled among themselves, saying, "Now I shall be King," or again, "Nay, it is I who shall be King." Men rose up in arms against each other, carrying fire and sword through the land, and the fields were wasted, the date gardens left to ruin, and not a cobbler or basket weaver carried on his trade. The land was anon reduced to desolation, and for neighboring peoples it became a hissing and a byword and a symbol of the faithlessness of woman and the foolishness of man.

And so it is, and ever shall be, that the greatness of man is nothing to the greatness of Allah, whose Name be forever magnified. Glory to Him whom the shifts of time waste not away, who rewardest the righteous an hundred-fold and who drivest the wicked through the gates of Hell. All praise be to Allah, the Lord of Creation!

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With "Triad," Katharine Eliska Kimbriel moves us to another exotic locale: the backwoods of the United States. This is the second story she has written about Alfreda and her odd gifts; the first, "Night Calls," appeared in Jane Yolen's 1988 anthology Werewolves. *Ms. Kimbriel's novel,* Hidden Fires, *came out this last winter. It follows* Fires of Nuala *and* Fires of Sanctuary, *the book which made her a 1987 Campbell nominee for best new writer.*

TRIAD

By Katharine Eliska Kimbriel

I LOST ALL MY ELDER KIN BY my eleventh year, and I always felt closest to Grandsir, but it was Granny who gave me the words I carry wrapped around my heart. Gran said that life was part of the great Triad, and the only things that counted in it were love and death. In the midst of life, we look for love and hide from death. In love, we chase life and flee death; while in death, we have love at our back as an anchor as the next life beckons to us.

Of course, she meant that life calls from several places — the past, the present, and the lives to come. I know that now.

Some people never learn these things; some learn only one or two of them. People like Gran and me, well, we see them over and over again. Gran liked that word "triad," but I always think of life as a circle. Though I'm getting older and bolder, the image holds true — we end up where we started. Only the lucky ones ever truly recognize the place.

What does this have to do with the dark on the other side? Now, think

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about it: what draws the undead to the shores of the living? Life — the blood that sustains us. Vampires are the worst scavengers of all. They're dead (or undead, to be pre-cise), while we're still hanging on to this world, and there's that unholy attraction in-between. It warps the circle, and any person with a touch of "the Gift" can smell a vampire half a day away.

Convincing regular folks is something else again.

I was into my fifteenth year of life when a vampire was found in Sun-Return, and my youth was nearly our downfall. Granny (Mama's grandam, really) had passed over years ago, and she was the last one in generations to harness the Gift of seeing things beyond sight. Folks believed I was strong with the talent, after that business with the werewolves a few years back, but elders won't listen to a youngling to save their lives — not until the wolf's at the door. Although Aunt Marta of Cat Track Hollow said I was a woman grown, and was to begin my lessoning in the month of Frost, I might as well have tried to whistle down the wind — it paid more attention to me. As far as Mama was concerned, I was merely a long-legged child eaten up with a deadly sin.

Even people who dream true dreams hope for love.

Of course I was jealous of her — her face, I mean. As fair as a spring day, with dark, dark hair and eyes, Livana looked like a Celtic queen, and every boy for five miles in any direction knew it. I was near-tall as Papa and flat as a board, while she was tiny and curved like the course of the Wabash River. Long blonde braids can't compete with that.

They came out of nowhere, the Hutchensons did. One day the Gustusson place was abandoned, the barn missing its doors and the house open to the sky, and the next they had started the repairs. Just the three of them, an older couple and their granddaughter, with a coop of chickens and a cow in tow. "From Cantev Way, by the sea," was all the history I ever got about them. Usually we're a bit slow welcoming newcomers; you can never be sure about strangers. But a daughter of near-marriageable age made folks offer the Hutchensons open arms.

Old Hutchenson was a hard worker, and paid a fair day's wage, so he had no lack of help. I accused my brother Josh of hoping to see Livana, and he didn't bother to deny it. *That* I could live with, but when Wylie started sniffing around her the night of Jakobsson's barn raising, well . . . I let my tongue get the better of me.

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Why didn't I notice that the Hutchensons were never seen 'cept at night? Instead of helping with the baking, Mrs. Hutch arrived with criss-crossed apple pie still warm from the oven. 'Course, Mr. Hutchenson was a bit bent for raising a barn, but he played a good fiddle, and he was in time to lead the dancing. Perfectly simple reasons for things, or so Mama told me in no uncertain terms.

"Something different about those folks," I muttered under my breath, grabbing another loaf of warm bread and slicing it up. I'm famous for mumbling — and Mama never misses a word.

"Good, hardworking people," Mama said calmly, giving the big crock of vegetable soup over the open fire a good stirring. "And their granddaughter has a lot of snap and color. It's no wonder the boys think she's pretty."

"That's not what I mean." My words stopped my movement, and I waited, listening to the silence. "Ever notice how Livana avoids all the womenfolk? I don't think she's said more than three words to any of us."

"No wonder, Alfreda." Mama's tone made me wince. "You're smoldering like a poker, girl. Show a little kindness. As if she could help having the face of an angel! Do you think any of those boys value a word from her lips or the work of her hands? Not likely."

It's not that Mama was right — it was the way she said it that kept me on edge. "I thought Wylie had more sense," I blurted out.

The reward for envy is misunderstanding. "Well, Miss Green Eyes, if he has, he'll be back, and if not, you're better off without him." With a last swish of the spoon, Mama called over her shoulder, "Soup's tender, Mary!" As she paused to dry her hands, Mama added, "Likely she'll settle on one of them soon, and then things will get back to normal."

"Why doesn't she want friends?" I whispered in turn, only half-listening. Yearning for black curls or no, I knew I was right in this: Livana avoided me, and something about the Hutchensons made my palms itch. My gaze grew blurred as my hands slowed and I considered the problem. Was I right, or were they right? And *what* was I right about? As my thoughts followed my sight, I realized I was staring in Shaw's direction . . . which meant we were staring at each other.

Shaw could have been Livana's brother, as fair and dark-haired as she, but he had less meat on his bones than I did. Where Wylie was carved of round muscle, Shaw was nothing but cords, and while Wylie was blessed with rose-and-gold coloring, Shaw was black and white. So why was it

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Wylie who blew hot and cold about me, and Shaw who always watched me? Gave me the crawlies, it did, and this gathering was no different from any other. If only he'd speak, and tell me what was on his mind, but no — he never spoke; he never interfered; he never so much as twitched an eyebrow concerning me . . . he just watched.

Maybe Mama was right; at the least, I could offer Livana some fresh bread. A quick glance around the dark clearing told me Wylie currently had the attention of the prize. They were seated over near the pump, Wylie perched on the edge of the trough, balancing with his usual flair. Tossing the last two loaves into a hand basket, I smoothed my soft blue denim skirt with taut fingers and moved toward the pair.

Wylie's high-pitched laughter caught me by surprise, and I hesitated by the center fire. No, he was laughing at something Livana had said, not at me (at least not to my face), so I kept walking. He didn't seem at all surprised to see me, but Livana jumped visibly at my arrival.

"Thought I'd bring you some of Mrs. Jakobsson's finest," I announced, placing the basket on my hip and facing the both of them.

"Lord bless, Allie, that's good of you! Nothin' tastes better than fresh bread still steaming from the oven." Reaching under the cloth, he pulled out several slices of the cracked wheat. "You gotta try it, Livana — Mrs. Jaks makes the best cracked wheat bread in the region!"

Smiling faintly, Livana accepted the piece of bread from Wylie, but she didn't take a bite. Catching my gaze, she immediately lifted the food to her lips.

Staring wasn't the way to convince her I was harmless. I let my eyes shift slightly, turning so I was looking between them instead of at either of them, and let Wylie do the talking. He was full of funny stories about the barn raising, things I either missed 'cus I was cooking, or hadn't seen the humor of, and he was amusing more than Livana. A way with words, my Wylie; even folks who had been here since sunup were enjoying the tale.

During a chuckle, my gaze dropped to the faint wavering of the trough water . . . and my stomach knotted tighter than a piece of crocheted lace. There was a black shadow of Wylie, golden in the firelight, and me a tall candle flickering a few paces farther on . . . but no Livana. She simply wasn't there.

Bewildered, I hazarded a quick glance to my left. No — she still sat on

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the hogshead next to the pump, her red-and-white gingham check black with the evening. But there was no matching dark outline rippling beyond her.

To this day I have no idea what I said or did. I know only that I left a good chunk of bread with Wylie, and mumbled something to them about enjoying the dancing. Then I hurried back to those tables groaning with food.

"Isn't she sweet?" said a familiar voice, and I turned to see my good friend Idelia. She was sawing away at a haunch of venison, the slices toppling like wood slats peeled from a log.

"Who?" I blurted out.

"Livana, silly. She's real nice. I saw you over with her and Wylie." Did I imagine it, or did Idelia's big brown eyes momentarily flick in my direction? "Wylie seems real taken with her."

"You've talked to her?" I asked, ignoring the hint.

"Sure. Early on, when we were unpacking her mother's pies. Livana always does the seasoning — she's good with desserts. Best apple pie filling I've ever bumped a thumb into." This last was said with a giggle.

"And you've bumped a few," I agreed. "Was that all you talked about?"

"Not much time for anything else. How could you get close to her, the way the boys sit in rings at her feet?" Sighing, Idelia tossed the big bone to one of Jakobsson's dogs. "I could scratch her eyes out, if she wasn't so nice."

"She didn't speak to me at all — just Wylie." I wasn't sure what to say. Idelia was usually pretty observant, but if she didn't notice anything strange about the Hutchensons. . . .

" 'Course not. Everyone knows that you and Wylie have been stepping out. If a boy liked you better than his old girlfriend, how would you act around her?" Idelia was both amused and concerned, her face intent.

Sympathy can surely reduce hostility. "Polite, I hope."

"She was polite to me," Idelia offered. "You're pretty imposing when you want to be, Allie. Maybe you make her nervous."

"She makes *me* nervous," I retorted.

"Fair is fair," Idelia said in her placid, infuriating way.

My urge to pick a fight was nipped in the bud by the whine of a fiddle. Or was it? It sounded more like a frightened dog. A few more notes . . . no, it was a fiddle. Now was the moment I grudged Livana the most, 'cus

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Wylie was a powerful good dancer. He didn't hesitate to take her hand and escort her toward the dancing area. As they walked toward the bonfire centered on hard dirt, one of Jakobsson's dogs trotted near. Almost by instinct, Wylie snapped his fingers invitingly at the big animal.

Then something happened that I couldn't explain away. Animals loved Wylie; he just has a way with them. But for the first time, I saw a dog refuse to go to him — not just ignore him, but stop dead in its tracks and refuse to budge.

Wylie looked bewildered, but his face smoothed as Livana shrank against his side. "Don't be afraid," I heard him say to her. "Bo's as gentle as they come. See, he can smell your fear!"

As he spoke, old Bo turned and fled the firelight. I caught a good look at him as he tore past, and saw my impression confirmed — that dog was *scared*. Hadn't Wylie always told me that an animal that sensed fear was likely to *attack*? Didn't he remember his own words? Couldn't he see Bo's fear?

Suddenly it was very cold; I didn't feel like dancing anymore. Hugging my arms to my body, I considered whether the walk back to our place would be too far. The moon was young, and set early, shedding little light. . . .

"Allie?" Papa's deep voice startled me out of my thoughts. "Your mother has run out of steam, and the little boys are tired. Josh is hitching with Farand as far as our gate, and they'll have room for you—"

"I'd rather leave now, Papa," I said quickly, my gaze still fixed on the whirling figures circling the bonfire. "I'm . . . I'm a bit tired myself."

Finally I glanced in his direction, to see his clear eyes catch the light and briefly flare sky blue. *Well, he's surely not fooled.* . . .

"All right," Papa said gently, slowly pulling his pipe from a pocket and tapping debris from the bowl. "I'll tell Farand you're coming with us. Say your good-byes and meet us by the big oak."

Somehow I didn't care for his choice of words; it sounded too *final* for my taste. But I went to say good night to Idelia.

AFTER A sleepless night tossing and turning, I spent the next few days convincing myself that my overactive imagination had finally pushed me into foolishness. Livana might be dangerously pretty, and her grandparents standoffish, but neither thing was a crime. It didn't soothe the unease burning in my breast, but it calmed the tiny voice within that kept carping at me.

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Still, I wasn't sleeping. My dreams were haunted by tree branches rattling in the winds of Vintage, and days of helping Mama harvest willow rods were wearing me away like stones beneath a stream.

I don't think Mama noticed; she'd been a bit distant since the werewolf business. After my brother Dolph was killed, she withdrew from us, as if she didn't want to pin her hopes on anything as fragile as a child. Lately she'd had a dreamy glow about her that made me hope there was another little brother or sister on the way. I thought it might do her good.

Papa knew — about me, at least. We always knew about each other, he and I, which was funny, when you realized the Gift came from Mama's side. I asked Gran about that once, and she said something about male-female flow and sympathy, but I was still not sure about it. Since I had to study lore with both Aunt Marta and Cousin Zelig, I was sure it had to be with learning some things from women and others from men. There was time and more to figure it out later.

In the meantime, I was tired and irritable, Mama thought I was sulking, and Papa started looking worried.

All this worked to my advantage about a week after the barn raising. Papa was going to Sun-Return, and Mama decided I could get the things she needed. That was her way of telling me I wasn't being too useful with the basket weaving. Knowing she was dead to right, I climbed up into the wagon without protest, and soon we were well on our way to the village.

We talked of simple things, the trip in — the new rocker Papa was making Mama for Christmas, the smokehouse we'd left Josh building, and what kind of design I wanted on my quilting frame, when Papa finally got around to working on it. What else could I have said? I had a lot of bad feelings, but nothing concrete. I'd almost convinced myself I'd imagined that Livana had no reflection.

All that changed when we arrived in town. There was a sizable crowd at the general store, where Joseph Halvdan was negotiating with old Knut, the shopkeeper, for the loan of his digging hound. Big Joseph spotted me slipping in through the swinging door, and waved for me to come over.

"Allie, girl! I was just wishing for you!" He put an arm around my shoulders and pulled me close. "Tell me, is there anything you can give Knut's dog to protect him from snakebite?"

I felt a frown cross my face. "A preventative? Well, people can put tanned leather between them and a snake. I don't know if—"

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"An herb or something, darling; we already discussed a chest pad for him."

"I wish. No, Big Joseph, there are plenty of things to reduce swelling and draw venom, like blazing star and the snakeroots, but I've yet to hear of a preventative." Wanting to be helpful, I added: "You might ask Aunt Marta over in Cat Track Hollow."

Both Big Joseph and Knut shook their heads. "No time for that. I think I've got snakes nesting in a burrow under the house," Joseph said. "All these warm days and cold nights have them riled up, and they're crawling up through the floorboards, looking for a nice place to sleep. My boy's been bit two nights running."

"Poisonous?" I asked quickly.

"He's still alive, so I'd say not, but it's not comfortable for him, poor tyke. Bit on the crook of the arm and the neck. A bit feverish and tired, but still breathing." Joseph tried to keep his expression cheerful, but I knew better. Little Joe was an only son, and his parents doted on him. After five daughters, he had been long hoped and prayed for.

"Tell Mrs. Joseph to boil a heaping teaspoon of blazing star root in a cup of milk, divide it into four doses, and give him the decoction four times a day," I suggested. "It'll make him pass water faster, and get any venom out of his system. Just to be sure. And then more water, so he doesn't dry out."

"I'll tell her," Big Joseph said, nodding his blond head in thanks. "Hope I can give to Knut's Blue Boy, too!"

"If necessary," I said seriously, as several men chuckled. Sending a dog after snakes wasn't funny — Knut certainly didn't look amused. But better a dog than a man. Surely they had tried smoke already. . . .

Big Joseph and Knut drifted back to their talk, which was filled with the merits of a leather pad as opposed to wrapping thin tin around the poor dog, while Mrs. Knut measured spices for my Mama. Papa had hinted on the way in that Mama was indeed going to present me with another brother or sister, so I used a bit of my precious horde of copper and bought some packets of flower seed. Annuals for color and perennials for longevity . . . thinking of her huge flower garden, I had to smile.

Lost in thought as I was, I didn't hear Wylie come into the store. He was right up next to me before I noticed him in one of Mrs. Knut's mirrors, and what I saw froze my mind.

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He looked exhausted, as if after a hard day harvesting. Usually rose and gold from the sun, Wylie seemed faded, as if his skin had turned overnight to bleached parchment. Never had I seen circles under his eyes; the skin between his lids and cheekbones looked bruised, as if someone had punched him. The faint smile he managed upon seeing me was familiar, but that was about it.

"Wylie?" I must have looked as shocked as I felt, because immediately his lips pulled tight. "Are you feeling all right?"

"I'm fine," he said loudly. "Just staying up too late, that's all."

"You're sure?" I heard myself ask . . . the words were faint.

"Quit playing doctor, Allie," Wylie snapped, moving past me in a hurry. "If I start feeling poorly, I'll go see Doc Wilson."

"I'm not playing doctor," I told his back as he disappeared into the depths of the store. "But I see what I see." As the words left my lips, I was aware of a silence that hadn't been present before. Glancing at the mirror hung to one side of the double doors, I saw that folks were watching me out of the corners of their eyes. *Stupid. So this is how people act when your man cheats on you.* But he wasn't really my man, so he wasn't cheating anyone — except himself, if he really was sick. I was in the back of the store before I realized I'd started walking.

"Wylie—" I touched his shoulder to get his attention, and felt the tension threading his muscles. As he turned toward me, I saw the bite . . . and couldn't pull my gaze from it.

Bit on the crook of the arm and the neck. Big Joseph's words echoed in my head, making it suddenly ache. Definitely something had nibbled on Wylie . . . more than once.

"What happened?" I gestured toward his neck as I spoke.

Wylie rubbed at the spot in response. "Bugs have been bad this fall," was his answer. "I told you I've been out late nights."

"What do you talk about, Wylie?" *Now, why did you ask that, fool?*

"Huh?" The change in the conversation confused him.

"Livana never says hardly anything. What do you talk about?" I repeated the words slowly, as if talking to a youngling. Something in me had to know if it was merely physical, or if she had other strengths as well.

"Only you would ask that." Wylie shook his head slightly. "Any other girl would scream, or cry, or throw something at me — and there's plenty

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in here to throw — but not you. You always question. Can't you just let be and enjoy something?"

He sounded resigned, almost pitying, and I found I had some anger after all. "I don't know why I waste time worrying about you! No matter what I say or do, it's wrong; why does it matter what I choose?" Drawing myself up straight as an ash tree, I said: "So go get gnawed in the dark! The least she could do is invite you in the house!"

A bit weak for a parting shot, but it was the best I could manage. Spinning on my heel, I stomped back over to the counter and picked up my purchases. Nodding my thanks to Mrs. Knut, I walked out of the store without looking back, trying to be dignified without looking prim.

Sweet lord, that hurt! I don't think I knew what Wylie was to me until I knew he was thinking about somebody else. My misery just about blinded me — I almost walked flat into Shaw Kristinsson, who was leaning up against the wall outside Mrs. Kristinsson's boardinghouse.

"I know you won't believe this, but he's not worth it," Shaw said. His voice was naturally quiet; I didn't think I'd ever heard him shout, in anger or in joy.

"He's not himself," I retorted, stiffening, tilting back my head to keep any tears from escaping.

"No," Shaw agreed, shaking his head slightly.

We eyed each other for a time, as I wondered what Shaw suspected . . . or knew. But old habits die hard, and that familiar shyness had hold of me, so I kept my thoughts to myself.

"Ready to head back, Allie?" I heard my father say. "It'll be dark before we're home as it is."

"Coming, Papa," I answered him, nodding once to Shaw and moving past him to where our wagon waited.

Too much too quickly . . . it made it hard for me to sort things out. I was quiet the trip back, and Papa respected the silence. We were less than a mile from home, when his voice finally came out of the twilight at me.

"Are you thinking about a trip to Aunt Marta's?" As calm as always, as if a whim to take one of the mules and ride a day to Cat Track Hollow were a common occurrence.

"I don't know what else to do, Papa," I admitted. "Something feels very wrong, but I don't know what it is."

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"So take all you know to Marta," Papa said, letting out the reins a bit to give Jupiter his head over some rough road. "If you go over it together, you'll be able to sort coincidence from catastrophe."

"Do you think I'm moonstruck or something?" I asked suddenly.

"Depends on what you mean," was the response. "If you mean feeling romantic, a bit, maybe. No harm in that — one way or another, you'll survive it. I'm not so sure Wylie is the right fellow for you, but there's no harm in liking him." This was matter-of-fact, as if he were talking about someone who wasn't there. "But the other — whether you're unbalanced? No, Alfreda, you're not moonstruck. You see, Livana *does* avoid you; she avoids your mother, too. She even avoids me, and I wasn't born with your Sight, although I've trained myself a fair piece." Although it was fairly dark, I knew Papa was looking at me. "Alfreda" was only for serious times.

"Then I'm not just imagining it." I made a statement out of the words.

"I just said that, Daughter." There was humor in his voice. Papa does so love to tease me. "Talk to Marta — that's what a good teacher is for, to set your feet on the path of knowledge."

"It's a long walk," I muttered, but Papa either didn't hear, or chose not to speak.

That was how I ended up perched on Snowshoe's broad back, facing into a crisp morning breeze. Crimson clouds tore across the sky like bloody rags; streams of early golden light made the undersides glow. Grandsir swore many times that once, the sun could rise in a sea of cloudless blue, but that had been in *his* grandfather's time. Nothing was quite the same, since the bombs fell during The Three Days. Weather was unpredictable, and harvest erratic, which was why we always stored food as if a bumper crop would be followed by famine . . .it often was. Strangest of all, creatures once common were rare, while werewolves and vampires were no longer bogey stories to frighten younglings. I had seen a werewolf with my own eyes . . . and I was beginning to wonder what else I'd seen.

Marta lived leeward of Cat Track Hollow, on the banks of Willow Run. She wasn't really my aunt — more a cousin removed a time or two. Papa's cousin, that is . . . as I thought on it, it made sense that Papa should be so sensitive to the dark on the other side. I had yet to learn the names of Marta's teachers, and had plumbed only the shallows of her knowledge, but I was confident she'd have some answers. As formidable as she ap-

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peared, I figured that few ghouls could stand up to Aunt Marta.

It was a long, long ride. I stopped two or three times to let Snowshoe rest, and to grab a cold drink. Food I munched down on the way, chewing in rhythm to my companion's gait. A mule was rarely as smooth-gaited as a horse, but it was steady for a long day's work. Compared to her usual duties, toting me to Cat Track Hollow was child's play, so I had no trouble with Snowshoe.

Old Sol was westering when we finally reached the run. Water called to us through the yellowing peachleaf and black willows, gurgling through an intricate path of stones. Climbing stiffly down from Snowshoe's back, I led her to the drooping arms of the rare weeping willows and up to the chinked log house Aunt Marta called home. Basket willows competed with sassafras, witch hazel, sweet crab apple, and black cherry and plum trees, while the familiar arching stems of the prairie rose covered the front wall. Smoke rose from the chimney — praise God she was home. Now that I'd arrived, my anxiety had returned.

I took my time with Snowshoe, checking her feet for stones or cuts, and then brushing her coat until it was smooth. We'd moved slowly enough that she was already cooled down by the time I tied her up in the lean-to — fresh water and hay was more than enough to tempt her. The Tennessee walker that was my aunt's pride and joy was missing; either pastured out or on loan, I'd bet. Would I find . . . ? Yes, there was a bucket of premixed bran mash cooling on a shelf. Shaking my head, I poured the meal into a trough for the mule.

How did Marta always know when I was coming? And would I be able to know that type of thing someday? Now, *that* gave me shivers.

The leather latch was out, so I knocked three times and swung open the door. Wonderful odors greeted me as I stepped over the sill — Marta's famous split-pea-and-ham soup, and her finely ground cornmeal bread, with real kernels mixed in the batter, and cheese melted on top. Before I'd even seen her face, I felt welcome.

Marta was opposite the fire, working at her small quilting frame. Her angular face, striking rather than pretty, tilted in my direction, and those sky-blue eyes of my father's family mirrored mine.

"Took you long enough, woman," she said dryly. "Set yourself down and have some mulled cider. I pressed it this morning."

Huh. Maybe this would be easier to explain than I thought — once

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she was through scolding me. I pulled the cork set loosely in the stone crock and, using several quilted pads to protect my hands, poured myself a mug of hot cider.

"So. Tell me everything. How are Eldon and Garda and the boys? Have you been keeping up with your reading? And tell me about your vampire."

I just stared at her.

Marta tossed back her sleek dark head and laughed, the wings of white hair at her temples flashing like flags. "Sweet Jesu, woman, anyone with the talent as strong as ours could smell that creature from three days away! But you weren't sure what you had until yesterday, were you?"

So I told her everything, from the arrival of the Hutchensons to Wylie's "bug bite." Marta didn't interrupt me, except for a nod now and then. Her fingers flew over the pattern we called Canada Geese, finishing the black in her frame even as I wrapped up my tale.

"You see the signs now?" she finally asked, loosening her frame and removing the completed block.

"But none of them *look* right," I responded, hating the whine edging my voice. "They look, well, normal!"

"No one's ever seen the granddaughter by day," Marta said calmly.

"She's my number one candidate," I admitted. "Her granddad works his fields, and Mrs. Hutch has been seen in town, but I've never seen Livana except at night."

"The older the vampire, the more light they can bear — some say they can even move around during the day, if they line their soles with their native soil," Marta reminded me. "Not direct sunlight, though. That'll fry them to a cinder quicker than anything. But I doubt the old folks are night flyers. Most likely they're kin of hers — parents, or even children . . . Livana may have had a family before she was stricken. But she's old enough in her power to have a considerable aura — that's why everyone else is so taken with her. She can smell that *you're* different, too. Why do you think she avoids you and Garda? You're the only ones who might penetrate her disguise. They made a mistake, settling here, but with a little luck, they could last a year or more before having to move on."

"Mama doesn't seem to notice anything," I said hesitantly. "Although Papa agrees with me."

"Your father is an exceptional man," Marta replied, pulling another quilt square from her basket. "If we hadn't been so closely related, I'd have

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"Catching her in her coffin would be best," Aunt Marta said, as she finished her corn bread.

set my cap for him myself. But don't blame your mama for spinelessness. Ever since that werewolf bit Dolph, she's been only half a person, and she never was that strong. She's a good woman, and she's done her duty, passing on the power. Some haven't the strength to face it, that's all."

"Mama's increasing, although she hasn't announced it yet," I said quickly, because I knew Marta would want to know.

"Boy or girl?" she demanded.

"Girl," I started, and then stopped, confused.

Marta smiled. "You try too hard, Allie. There's a special little voice inside you that tells you things. You just need to recognize when it's talking to you. Now—" Clamping the new quilt block into the frame, she moved it aside and stood. Nothing bent about my Aunt Marta — she was easily Papa's height, as were her sons and daughters. "Let's have some of this soup and plan our attack. Can't have a vampire running around chewing on our good villagers, much less the boy you're sweet on."

It wasn't until later that I realized Aunt Marta kept referring to Wylie as "the boy." Not so remarkable, except that she'd started calling me "woman." . . .

Well, Livana might not alternate between gauntness and pallor and the bloated, mottled red that the old writing warned us about, but a vampire was a vampire, and certain things would cowl her right quick.

"Catching her in her coffin would be best," Aunt Marta said as she finished up her last piece of corn bread. "But we can't count on it. If her family is keeping her secret, they may be willing to fight for her — if only because they fear her. I doubt she's more than a hundred years old, if those folks bear her any resemblance at all, which is to our advantage. If she's still young, she probably hasn't much talent yet for shapeshifting. Becoming mist or bat takes a lot of work. If she hasn't needed to learn, she'll be clumsy."

"They definitely look alike," I assured her.

"That's a point for our side — but we don't count on it. Chances are she *does* have the dog shape, which is part of the reason Jakobsson's animal was so afraid of her. But mist and flying are more dangerous for our purposes."

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"I wonder how she became a vampire," I whispered, reaching for another piece of corn bread.

"First we get rid of her," Marta said. "Then you can question her folks."

"But you don't think we should get help." This had been what we'd been arguing about, ever since we started our little council of war.

"Remember how long it took to find all the werewolves?" Marta had her shrewd look on her face. She'd been a week or more away when it all started up, her eldest daughter having just been confined with a difficult delivery, so we had had to work things out for ourselves. "We don't need a mob for this, Allie. Odds are we'd lose her in the confusion. No, this has to be done quickly and quietly, by as few people as possible. I think that you and I and your father can take care of the situation. But we need a plan. And protection."

Rising from her favorite rocker, Marta moved over to the beautiful cherry keepsake box Uncle Jon had made her as her wedding present. Opening it, she pulled out several chains of silver and brought them over to my side. "Give me your hand," she said.

I extended my left arm. Deftly, Marta fastened a flat bracelet of woven silver strands around my wrist. She'd set another one in my lap, and soon I was wearing it as well. There was no time to protest the matching close-fitting necklace, for she brushed my words aside.

"Your silver chain and cross are useful, but you need more silver at your neck," Marta said seriously. "We don't want any chance at all that *she* might brave a tiny silver burn for a chance to attack you. The cross is double protection, and you may need it elsewhere."

"But what about you?"

Chuckling, Marta tugged down her high neckline, revealing an identical necklace. "When you reach my level of Seeing, woman, it will never leave your body, except for an occasional quick polish. The more you See, the more things come to visit."

That wasn't encouraging. "Where did all these come from?"

"They're very old, Allie. This set belonged to my teacher, Dame Allison. She left it to me to give to *my* student."

"Gran?" Had she known about me even then?

"Indeed. She suspected you had the power, but she knew how your mama would react, so she kept her peace." I opened my mouth to ask another question, but Marta anticipated it. "Your father has a similar set,

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though he don't talk about it. He'll be fine. Now — let's get down to details."

We hammered out our plan, as the fire burned low and the candles guttered. Marta's Sweet William was pastured, as I suspected, but we'd bring him in early, and be back in Sun-Return by dusk. Whether we'd mount our attack that same night depended on how strong we felt, but Marta expected us to need a full night and day of rest before we made the attempt.

In the end, it was mostly moot. The trip was simplicity itself, and Papa was keen to aid us in our need, but Marta woke that fateful morning with swollen eyelids and a hacking cough, and I knew we weren't destined to hunt vampires together. Not this time.

What do you prescribe for the foremost apothecary in a week's riding? "Comfrey with a pinch of ginseng?" I suggested, settling next to her cot.

"Just what I was about to request," she said hoarsely, and I jumped to prepare the decoction. Just getting the water to boil would take a few minutes, as Mama had already emptied the pot, so I rattled about shaving the roots, my thoughts filled with vampires.

"We can't wait long," I heard myself say aloud.

"No," Marta agreed, and started coughing. I brought her a glass of cool well water to ease her throat, and when she had control again, she said: "You can't wait for me. You'll have to go ahead tonight."

"But . . . but how can we do it with only two of us?" Originally, the plan had called for Marta and me to scope out the Hutchenson place during the day. If we could find the coffin, we'd get there before dusk and do the deed then, with Papa acting as our rear guard should the Hutchensons — or anyone else — care to interfere. If we failed to find the coffin, we'd have to watch the place until Livana returned toward morning, and follow her down into her lair. Still, there was no chance for error, once we'd begun, which was why two were necessary. Livana wasn't going to lunge up when that stake hit her chest if someone was pinning her across the throat with a garlic braid threaded by a silver chain.

The idea of trying to stake a vampire without that control actually made me shake. Although the undead preferred to feed over several nights, in order to drain every scrap of soul and vitality, they were perfectly capable of draining a body in moments. . . .

"It's harder, but possible. And I might be able to find you a third,

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although it will take me some time, feeling like this." Another sip of water, and Marta continued: "Instead of guarding the coffin, your papa will have to destroy it."

"*Destroy* it?" I was appalled. "But — but how can I get the drop on her—"

"You can't." This was weary. "It's too dangerous. In the coffin, she's on her native soil; even after sunrise, she'll have enough energy stored to spring out at you, if no one chokes her off. And you *must* have a guard to attack a coffin. What if old Hutchenson came up behind you with a pitchfork?"

Shuddering, I moved to pour boiling water into an enamel bowl that already held shaved comfrey and ginseng root. "So what am I doing while he's smashing up the coffin?"

"Depends on where it is. If it's close to the house, and the old ones will hear you'll have to guard for *him*. Then you both wait until she comes back at Indian light, and drive her into an enclosed area until the sun is up. Without her soil to give her strength, she'll be weak enough that you can run her through at a distance, with a long stake. Once she stops struggling, the rest is the same." At the expression on my face, Marta said gently: "I know. I hoped we could do it the other way. It's hard enough to hammer a stake into a girl, without all that. But before it's over, you'll know that what you're dealing with isn't human anymore."

"And if the coffin is in the barn, or something?" I asked, turning back to the fire.

"Then you track her while your papa burns or smashes the coffin and scorches the soil. When you find her, frighten her off from any victims if you can, and keep her away long enough for him to finish destroying the thing and get into position for the next step. Then. . . ." Marta went into another coughing jag, and I held her until it passed. "Then you either follow her . . . or lead her . . . back to Hutchenson's farm."

"Sweet Jesu," I whispered without a trace of irreverence. Following her was bad enough, but leading her! If she saw me, the game was up — it was kill or be killed, since she would know there was little chance her glamour would work on me. And if she *could* change to mist—"

"You can do it, Allie," came Marta's weak voice. "I wouldn't let you try unless I thought you could handle it. The important thing is not to panic, and I don't think you will. Just remember that Big Joseph's child and your

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boy are doomed unless we stop her tonight. In the meantime, we need to get you ready. We need a powerful amount of garlic, woman!"

"Garlic is one thing we're never short of, Aunt," I finally said as I strained the decoction and added cold water to it. "You just relax and drink some of this while I fetch some bulbs, and we'll braid the day away!"

I tried to keep my tone light, but Marta wasn't fooled. She pressed my hand as I brought her the medicine. "You can stop her," Marta said again.

"I have to." It was that simple.

COME SUNDOWN, I found myself squatting in a brush pile behind Hutchenson's barn, waiting for Livana to head out on her nightly round. I was wearing a flannel work shirt and a pair of Papa's old pants, and I felt half-dressed. Still, I had to admit that I had more freedom to move, and, although baggy, the clothing was warm. Along with my silver, I was wearing a huge garlic braid. It looped my neck and then crossed between my breasts, ending up tied around my waist. Since I could barely stand the smell of myself, I doubted that Livana would choose to get close to me.

Papa was similarly bound in bulbs. He sat right next to me, wrapped in stillness and darkness, and I was grateful for his presence. It was up to us now — Aunt Marta hadn't despaired of finding help, but the person she had in mind was apparently farther than walking distance, and he might not make it here in time. At any rate, we weren't waiting for him, whoever he was.

Shoving my hands into my pockets, I fingered one of the many cloves of garlic nestled within. With luck, I wouldn't have to defend myself with anything except a stake, but my side pouches were stuffed with garlic, just in case. Just in case—

Then we saw her leave the barn. She was wearing white, which made her a lot easier to spot. The waxing moon had yet to clear the trees, but when it did, it would give us light for over half the night. Praise be that Papa had come earlier and scouted out the place. Clever of them to have put her coffin in the old tack room. With scarcely a mule to call their own, no one would ever think to go in there, even if they were in the barn. That isolation was one less thing to worry about.

My job, besides braiding garlic, had been to see Big Joseph Halvdan's son. After a great deal of thought, we decided to tell the family what was

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going on. It took some fast talking on my part to keep Joseph from going after the Hutchensons with his ax, but once I explained the plan, he was game. The hardest thing was convincing Mrs. Hal that the boy had to remain in his room. Livana would know something was wrong if the room was empty — or had another person in it.

I had spent the afternoon reinforcing the room: hanging garlic braids around the doorways and windows, pouring mustard seed in cracks, painting runes and crosses at every possible opening. Last of all, I gave Mrs. Hal a tisane of bee balm, chamomile, marjoram, and peppermint to make sure the child slept. All the wards of earth couldn't keep out a vampire if the victim invited it in — and what with Livana's hypnotic manner, the boy had undoubtedly done just that several nights previously, although he had no memory of it.

My mind kept returning to those wards. Would they hold? The slightest opening was enough, for Livana had already been invited into that house. Only if my efforts succeeded would she need another invitation to get past those crosses.

Even as I worried at my precautions, I watched Livana disappear into the woods. Touching my father's shoulder briefly for strength, I crept after her.

Livana was moving fast. A slip of dress was all I had to follow; it flitted in and out of the trees, weaving like a shuttle among the trunks. My heart was racing faster than my feet; she was heading straight to the Halvdans' farm. It was no mean distance to the place — we would spend the best part of an hour getting there. Why couldn't she use the road? I knew better than that; there was a chance, no matter how remote, that someone might spot her on it. And of course, she couldn't get hurt tromping through the darkness. I was the one who would trip over logs, get scratched by branches, and have night critters startle me.

If she's hungry, she can't change shape, Aunt Marta had told me. Thank heaven for small favors, because she was moving fast enough as it was — I'd never keep her in sight if she shifted. I had the short stake with me, and had to keep it hugged across my chest to keep from tripping. Holding the thing was going to tire my arms, but I couldn't sling it over my shoulder, 'cus it would catch on branches. I just had to make do.

It seemed like forever, slogging through those woods, but finally we

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reached Halvdan's north field. Empty corn-husk tepees loomed tall in the growing moonlight, and a flapping noise made me seize the cross dangling from my neck. An owl? No — worse than that: the scarecrow, catching a stray gust of wind. Feeling foolish, I looked around for Livana.

Halfway across the field! Climbing between two rails of the fence, I hurried after her. Grateful for my sturdy boots, I did my best to make up my losses, but Livana arrived at the house long before I did.

I could hear her gasp and hiss of dismay quite clearly in the lull of the wind. So — first check. *Something* in my protections had slowed her down. Did she suspect my handiwork, or did she think her glamour had failed with the parents? What would she do next, seek another victim?

No; not yet. As I grew in knowledge, I would learn that getting a potential victim to accept you was more than half the battle. Although I didn't know it then, Livana was not about to give up so easily. She paced every step of that wall, seeking an unguarded crack . . . examined that house so carefully my body cramped from lack of movement. All those hours spent pouring mustard seed had been worth it.

Fighting off sleep, I stretched my neck from side to side, trying to prevent the muscles from tightening. At that moment, Livana froze in midstep.

Did she hear something — cloth rubbing against the garlic braid, the wood stake catching on a thread? Or did she *smell* me . . . smell living blood that was too large for night vermin and not confined by wards? Whatever the reason, she knew she wasn't alone.

My pulse was racing like a house afire as a lump rose in my throat. Keep her busy, that was my job. I had walked this property from one end to the other, and it was time to lead my quarry a merry chase. Slowly, I slipped away from the house and toward the southern boundary of the farm.

Livana followed. There was no haste to this walk; I kept a healthy lead, and she did not lose my trail. With effort, I could move almost soundlessly — almost. If you want speed, you must make a bit of noise. But I wasn't sure if Livana was tracking me by nose or ear, so I had to leave her something to go by.

Then I heard the dog. It sounded big — I heard large sticks snapping as it moved through the underbrush — and it was getting closer. There was no reason to fear a dog, especially since they didn't like vampires—

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Unless it was Livana. Suddenly I had wings at my feet. If she was shifting, I had lost all advantage, and I had to get as far away as possible. Stepping onto the path that led to the creek, I started running.

There was nothing of grace or subtlety to that run — I knew it was my life that was being weighed, and at the moment, it wasn't worth much. Basic teachings rose from my inner consciousness, and I increased my speed. The creek; I had to cross the creek, or I was doomed. Behind me, I could hear the dog, still snuffling, seeking my trail, hearing my passage — The creature belled, giving voice to its find, and it was all I could do to continue. Fortunately, my feet had more sense than I had; they kept moving.

Boot touched slimed rock, and I fell facedown into the shallows of the narrow stream. Scrambling for purchase, my toes found pebble-packed mud, and I churned to my feet. Hallelujah! I'd found the ford! A moonbeam pricked out the stepping-stones, but it was a little late to think about preventing pneumonia. Grateful that garlic kept things at bay whether wet or dry, I waded over to the other side and up the bank. Finding a friendly tree, I threw myself into its shadow. To my surprise, I found I was still hanging on to the stake with a death grip.

Would her new shape protect her from running water?

The beast reached the ford and immediately halted, weaving from side to side as it checked its scent trail. A gust of wind stirred a flurry of leaves, and when they had settled, Livana stood next to the creek. It was that simple. . . .

She stood listening awhile, her head cocked to one side, her fingers flexing like talons. Then she backed away from the water and started down the trail toward the farmhouse. Only a few steps; she was difficult to see, but I could just make out her shape as she moved off the trail and into the undergrowth.

Silence.

I didn't need a signpost to show me the way things were going. She was waiting for me; I had no doubt of it. *You're going to wait a long time,* I vowed, shaking, as I knelt in the mulch layering the forest floor. *I don't need to eat, and I think you do.* Shifting must have taken something out of her. The question was, how long would she wait until she decided I wasn't going to panic and bolt?

Because I wasn't. I knew my teachings, and there was running water

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between me and that vampire. The only way Livana could cross it was in her coffin, and then only at greatest risk. And although she didn't know it, her coffin would be crumbling into ash about now. Praise the Powers That Be that there wasn't some special link between a vampire and its coffin!

Moonlight crept through the trees to pour down upon us like molten silver, and still we sat, Livana and I. The waiting was harder than I thought it would be — terror alternated with indifference, as long moments of inactivity dulled my instincts. I was just beginning to wonder if she planned to wait out the night, when I saw the white spot detach itself and start back toward Halvdan's buildings.

It was a long moment before I crossed the creek.

I moved a bit faster than I should have, trekking up that trail, but there was no danger — not there. Livana was still prowling around Big Joseph's house, looking for an opening. She even entered through the front door, and I heartily prayed that Big Joseph and his lady were in their own bedroom. They were safe, never having invited her in, unless they surprised her — then the rules might change. Would the garlic and crosses at the inner door deter her?

In moments she returned to the porch. A tiny sigh of relief threaded through me, and I tightened my grip on the stake. The moon was past the roof of the sky and heading west. . . . Should I wait, or force the issue?

Livana decided for us. Without hesitation, she started back toward Hutchenson's farm. There was enough haste in her manner that I felt mildly alarmed. Did she suspect something? Had she started thinking about the coincidence of all that garlic, plus someone spying her out? Papa was alone. . . . I increased my speed.

The wind had picked up, and the temperature dropped; we were edging up on a storm. Branches creaked and rubbed against each other, echoing the quaking boughs of my dreams. I was a bit turned around in the trees, but it seemed the gusts were from the north, and I was grateful, for that meant the wind was now in Livana's face. *Carry me away*, I prayed. *Carry my scent far, far away.*

A front meant clouds, and clouds meant fitful moonlight — the going was harder heading back. I used the stake as a staff, making sure Livana wasn't leading me back by way of any pits or anything. In the meantime, I kept my eyes fixed on her. If she had the strength to shift again, I'd lose her for sure.

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We reached Hutchenson's clearing just as night rolled over into Indian light, that hazy gray before the dawn that warns the darkness will soon end. Entering the tack room proper required moving around to the east entrance, so we swung to the right, over barren fields. Try as I might, I couldn't smell any trace of burning. I hope that meant Papa had covered his tracks well.

Livana was nearing the doorway; shifting my grip on the stake, so I could get a running lunge if necessary, I lengthened my stride. *Freeze up, and she'll kill you both; it's as simple as that,* I told myself, trying to draw oak into my backbone. She'd be fighting for her life, and that meant she'd be more dangerous than anything else I'd ever faced . . . or could hope to face. *Powers That Be, lend me your aid!* It was light that repulsed the strength of darkness . . . light. Whatever else I might someday be, I'd admit to being in the service of the Light. Now it was time to prove it.

We'd agreed on a signal. Papa had a lantern with a night shield on it, and he'd brought it along. When I saw a flicker of light, I was to move up to the door and block it, trying to keep her penned inside. If she shifted, I was to move — we didn't want to fight a ravening dog in close quarters, and we couldn't contain mist. As for a bat, Papa had even brought a net with several silver threads, something Aunt Marta had pulled out of a trunk —

Suddenly I could see light, and I thought my heart would stop. But I kept moving, now at a run, right up to the doorway —

Praise be that that "short" stake was more than three feet English, and that I'd kept it pointed before me! Livana popped up at the doorframe so fast I nearly impaled her then and there. Her face was distorted, furious, and as she backed up and turned halfway toward the lantern, I could see that her canines were visibly longer than usual. There was nothing ladylike about her dainty form or hands now . . . they *were* talons.

With a snarl, she leaped back into the tack room, reaching with long arms toward the lantern. Beyond the bright beam, the tip of a stake appeared, poking right back at her. Flinching, she tried to keep away from the wood even as she groped for my father. As my eyes adjusted to the glare, I could see him; cool as an autumn breeze, his face betraying no anxiety, Papa was methodically pushing Livana back into a corner.

His actions gave me time to snatch up the longer stake I'd left waiting here. I tucked it under my left arm, pulling my strength behind it, even as I

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switched the shorter stake to the right hand. Should I brace it at the doorway?

Then Livana shifted, and the nightmare began. In the narrow beam of light, I could occasionally see what had been tracking me through the woods, and if I'd eaten dinner, I'd have tossed it. A more misbegotten-looking creature you have never seen, scarcely dog at all — and strong. It had shoulders like a mastiff's and jaws like a pit bull's. If it got hold of one of us, we didn't have a prayer.

There was a lot of snarling and barking as the Livana beast grabbed hold of Papa's stake and started chewing on it. The sound echoed, as if another animal answered somewhere outside, but I didn't have time to figure it out. I kept poking at her to see if I could force her to change back (it takes strength to stay in another form, and she hadn't fed in a bit), but I also moved away from the open doorway. Papa had taken the precaution of bolting the double doors that led to the barn proper. Although their timbers shook like birch leaves in a high wind as Livana threw herself against them, the bar holding the doors could be moved only by human hands.

Finally the dog charged past me out the door. I whirled, just in case she planned to immediately return and make mincemeat of me, but it sounded like she was too busy. A horrible noise broke out, one I had never heard before — it sounded like a dogfight, only a hundred times worse than any I'd ever imagined. Even as Papa lit a second lantern and carefully placed it to give us more light, I peered around the doorframe.

It *was* a dogfight. Livana was wrestling with something as big as she was, something the slightest bit luminous. Swallowing what little spit I had left, I contemplated leaving the tack room, and then decided against it. Whatever Livana was fighting, it seemed determined to keep her from getting much farther, which was all to the good for our cause. There was only one place for her to run — back into the tack room. So I looked for someplace to stand. My back to the wall, with a bit of height.... The fight drew closer, and I quickly chose my spot.

Not a moment too soon, either. The dogs crashed into the doorsill, Livana dragging the other almost into the tack room before the new creature let go and ran out of the barn. I heard it slide to a stop, though, just beyond the lantern glare, and knew it was still there. Someone else was there, too; I could hear stones crunching against each other underfoot.

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Even as the sounds registered, Livana changed back into a woman . . . or the semblance of a woman. Her arm was torn where jaws had gripped her, but no blood poured forth — it was like slicing a corpse. It might have been a real bug bite, the way she ignore it. She was too busy watching the two of us.

Then the crowning glory of the night burst forth. Walking right into the tack room as if he owned the farm was Wylie. Even by lantern light, he looked worse than when I last saw him, and I was appalled . . . but he was staring at my father.

"Have you lost your mind, sir?" Wylie asked, walking right up to Livana. "Why are you in here waving that around when there's that big monster of a dog out there? Part wolf by the look of him, and—"

"Wylie, help me!" Livana shrieked, throwing her arms around his neck. "They're going to hurt me!"

"What?" He looked at her in concern, and my blood froze. *Glamour. What kind of a fog was he in!*

"I . . . I waited for you, Livana, a long time, and when you didn't come—," Wylie started slowly, reaching to loosen her tight grip on his shoulders.

"I couldn't get away to see you tonight, not until just a few minutes ago, but they won't let me leave! I don't understand!" This last was a wail as she gripped his hands.

Returning her grasp, Wylie turned to Papa and said: "Is this true? Why are you frightening her?"

Papa slowly gestured at the pair of them with his long stake. "Move away from her, Wylie. She's very dangerous."

"Dangerous?" His voice was thick with disbelief.

"She's a vampire, Wylie," I piped up, unable to keep silent. "We've got to stop her before she kills someone. She's been draining Little Joe Halvdan — and you."

Wylie just stared at Livana, which was *not* what we wanted. The more he met her eyes, the stronger the spell between them. "Have you been chewing locoweed, Allie?" he finally asked. "Or are you jealous after all?"

"Wylie, she's a—"

"Where's her coffin?" Wylie said sarcastically.

"What's left of it is smoldering out in the midden," Papa said conversationally.

Livana let out a scream of terror and fury and lunged for Wylie's throat.

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Papa swung his stake like a quarterstaff and slammed it across her back. With a squall, she fell to her knees, moaning in pain, and I was shocked to see a weal begin to form, even where her dress took the blow.

It was the chance I'd waited for, and I grabbed Wylie's arm, tugging him back toward the door. "Run!" I hissed. "You don't have any protection, and we do! Run!" Wylie just stared at me. It was obvious that this scene had shaken the glamour, but he was still partially entranced.

Livana was back on her feet and reaching for Wylie, but I got my stake across us both, shaking it in her face even as Papa prepared to shove his into her back. Sensing danger, she whirled and started stalking him — and he didn't back away.

Sweet Lord, could folk wearing silver be entranced? "Eldon!" I screamed, naming my father and beating at Livana with my ash stake.

Someone flitted past me like a shadow and started throwing necklaces of garlic all over the place. One settled over Livana's neck, and it snapped the trance like a blow across the face. Gasping for air, she clawed ineffectively at the braid even as another settled over her form. It was Shaw, lit by the first golden shaft of morning. Livana slashed at him, her talons shredding his sleeve to tatters.

I acted without conscious thought. Shoving Wylie hard, I pushed him back into the darkness of the tack room. Diving like a child at play, I slammed into Shaw, and we both collapsed against the far wall.

A woman was screaming. No . . . not a woman. Something that had once been a woman, maybe, but that voice had nothing human in it. The smell of burning filled the air; first the smell of torched cotton, then singed garlic, and finally sun-kissed, rotted meat. Rolling over, I saw a sight I will never forget — framed in a rectangle of golden light, Livana was lit like a torch, smoke rising from her like ground fog. Desperately, she tried to walk, but her strength was gone. Crumpling into a heap, she even tried crawling out of the sunlight. There was time for one last pitiful attempt to dig her talons into dirt and pull herself along, before her flesh caved in on itself, and the flames died as if doused by water. All that was left was a blackened skeleton.

It happened so quickly I had no time to be either frightened or sickened. Finally I understood what Aunt Marta had meant: *You'll know that what you're dealing with isn't human.* Nothing human could have burned like that, so quickly, crumbling into ash —

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Wylie's croak of anguish broke off my thoughts. He was creeping over to the skeleton even as I heard familiar coughing just outside the door.

"Sweet Lord, Allie! How will you answer for this? What did you do to her?" Wylie was so appalled he didn't know what to say or do.

I started getting mad. I knew he was still bespelled a bit, and I knew I should be patient, but I'd had a long night, and I didn't need to be where this was going.

"I'll take him, Alfreda," came Marta's voice. She was leaning against the doorframe, a smile on her thin face.

"Aunt Marta!' I struggled to get my foot out from under Shaw's long legs. "You shouldn't be up—"

"No coddling, woman," Marta ordered, holding up one hand. "I'm not at my best, but I'm not at death's door, either. Everyone needs a test before they are brought into the mysteries.... This was as good as anything. But I found out after you'd left that these folks came from Cantev Way. The vampire they drove out of Cantev Way wasn't more than a hundred, but she had a reputation for cunning and glamour that I didn't like. I was afraid she might prove too strong for two of you, so I went out myself to find Shaw."

"I was off digging roots for Zelig," came Shaw's quiet voice from behind me. "Since no one knew where to look, no one had found me. Of course, Marta couldn't tell them why it was so important!"

"The other dog?" I asked, turning around.

"Wolf," Shaw said without a flicker of expression. "A friend of mine."

Ah-huh. I studied him a moment, waiting to see if my power responded to him. It did, and yet....

No. Not a werewolf. Whatever had happened, there was nothing evil in it. Digging roots for Cousin Zelig, eh? A test before teaching the mysteries.... What had his test been? I was suddenly very curious about those wizardly secrets, but, for the time being, I set my attention on my father.

Papa was getting stiffly to his feet, but his tired face wore a smile. "Getting too old for this sort of thing," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. "Good thing you screamed my name, Daughter. That gaze was as deadly as a snake's, when she chose to use it!"

"Deadly is the word," Marta agreed, nudging the pile of ash and bone. "We'll need to separate the head from the neck, and run an ash stake through the heart area before we finish burning the corpse. Probably ought

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to put her with what's left of the coffin, for safety, and burn everything together." Sighing, Marta glanced at Papa. "Can you find us a crossroads with nothing at the heart of it? If you'll take care of it, I'll break the news to the Hutchensons."

We *did* seem to need a lot of crossroads in Sun-Return — we'd buried four werewolves in my lifetime!

"And you," she went on, turning to me. "You did well, woman. It's dangerous, killing a vampire, but you made it look easy."

I gave what I now recognized as my equivalent of a shrug, lifting my eyebrows as I rolled my eyes and tilted my head. "Took three of us, plus a wolf. And it didn't feel easy at the time."

Marta's smile was genuine. "The second test was whether you know your own limitations. You'll do, Cousin; you'll do." Marta nodded once to Shaw before leading the dazed Wylie out of the tack room. "Thank you again, friend."

"I had a stake in it, too," he reminded her, nodding in turn.

Watching his thin face, a collage of planes and shadows, I said: "What stake?"

For the first time, I saw Shaw looked startled. "I mean . . . if you'd failed, Marta and I would have had to go after her again, and she'd have been warned."

He wouldn't meet my eyes. Feeling a smile pulling at my lips, I said: "Nice, but obvious. Try again."

"Well. . . ." He hazarded a glance in my direction, and I caught his gaze with my own.

Maybe that was a mistake. Dark, those eyes, like a well. So dark you could fall in and forget to climb back out. . . .

"Sometimes your eyes are like fog, and sometimes they are full of the sun," Shaw said suddenly.

I was getting an inkling of something. The thought wasn't fully formed yet, which was just as well — foolish and beglamoured or not, I still had a soft spot for Wylie. But now I had some other things to think about . . . and the thinking might prove interesting.

"Come on," I said, gesturing with a crooked finger. "It takes a lot of brush to burn a coffin down."

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Lois Tilton's postholocaust vampire novel, Vampire Winter, *just appeared. She has sold short fiction to* Aboriginal SF, Weird Tales, Dragon, Women of Darkness, *and* Sword and Sorceress. *The following tale marks Lois's first appearance in these pages. "The Soldier's Bride" begins like a traditional high fantasy story, but ends with a very dark twist.*

The Soldier's Bride

By Lois Tilton

IT WAS THE end of another successful campaign. The ravens were already gathering on the battlefield when I threw my saddlebags onto my horse and left behind my company and the last five years of my life without a second glance. I had been a younger son, gone out into the world to seek my fortune as a soldier, but I was weary of the blood and the killing. I had at least two hundred talers in my bags, the spoils of the battlefield, and I meant to use it to start a new life.

For leagues around, the countryside lay in ruins. I rode through a desolation of trampled crops and deserted villages where bodies hung at every crossroads and on every unburned tree, ravens picking at the blackened tatters of their flesh. One black bird croaked in protest when I turned off the road and followed a path into the forest. It was dark and cool among the trees. Yet there surely were bandits and outlaws lurking deep in the woods, deserters from the armies and dispossessed peasants, starving and desperate. I rode with my saber in its scabbard and my pistols loaded

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and ready, the two in their holsters at both sides of my saddle, and the third thrust into my boot, but I encountered no one, not outlaws or honest travelers. Even the sound of the birds gradually faded away.

The unnatural silence grew disturbing, and as I went deeper and deeper into the forest, my trail faded away until I began to fear I was lost. So I was relieved when at evening I came upon a stone house standing alone beneath a grove of trees. It appeared to be a nobleman's hunting lodge. I was weary, and the night was growing cold, and the thought of finding a fire and a bed for the night drew me to dismount. I took my pistols with me to the door, for I was not sure, in such unsettled times, what kind of welcome I would find. The place might well be a bandits' den, I was thinking as I eased open the latch.

The only light came from the dying embers at the hearth, and huddled there among the ashes—

Her head came up; she saw me. "Oh," she whispered with desperate urgency, "whoever you are, please help me! Hurry, please!"

I hesitated only an instant. She was chained to the hearth, clothed only in a shift of linen so thin that the firelight outlined the shape of her body beneath it, just as if she were naked in front of me. But beneath the glorious curling mass of her yellow hair, an iron collar was fastened around her neck.

As if she knew what effect the sight of her was having on me, she stretched forward so the creamy white skin of one breast was exposed through a rent in her shift. "Help me," she pleaded. "Set me free and get me out of this place, and it will all be yours — my dowry, everything!"

Her eyes held mine. They were green and almond-shaped, and they were promising a lifetime of sensual delights. And, thinking in practical terms despite my rising lust, I calculated that with a respectable dowry added to what I carried in my saddlebags, I would possess a modest fortune.

"Oh, hurry!" she urged me, and I came up to the fireplace to examine the chain that held her. With the blade of my saber, I set to work to force open the collar. The steel was not quite strong enough, and the blade snapped off in my hand, but at last I managed to break the lock and set her free.

Released, she fell against me, and my hand closed around her bare breast. My other hand went to her shift, to lift it up, but she suddenly

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pushed me away and pulled the torn cloth together to cover herself. "Not now!"

I was startled by her tone. Her entire manner had changed. Instead of begging, she was commanding me. Who was she? What kind of bride had I won?

"We have to leave this place," she insisted. "Go, through the gallery there; you'll find a chest with my clothes. Hurry!" She picked up my pistols from the hearth and thrust them at me.

I stared at them, at her, suddenly realizing how little I knew about this situation. Who had chained her here? And why? "Who's back there?" I asked.

"No one. It doesn't matter." Her expression was scornful. "I'd taken you for a soldier. Are you afraid?"

I considered the question. No, I wasn't afraid, but neither was I eager for bloodshed, not under these circumstances. "I don't want any more killing," I said slowly. "I have money; I can buy you decent clothes at the next town."

"And have everyone see me like this? Do you know what people would think? I'd be ruined!"

But when I still hesitated, she said, exasperated, "They're only a few bandits. They fell on us in the forest, killed my servants, then brought me here. I think they mean to hold me for ransom. But they rode away this morning, and if we hurry, we'll have time to get my chest before they come back." Her voice softened, and she came closer, looking up at me with those green, green eyes. "My dowry is in there. You wouldn't take your bride without her dower, would you, Captain?"

At that moment, I would have taken her naked and penniless. Lust was her weapon. Lust, and lies. Her presence overwhelmed my reason. I reluctantly went to the iron-hinged door at the other end of the hall. "My things are in the room at the end of the gallery," she urged me. "Look for a wooden chest with brass fittings."

The gallery was a short corridor with doors on either side and another at the end. I opened the door to find a small closet with a brassbound chest in one corner, just as she had described it. I was starting to put my pistols into my belt so I could lift it, when behind me I heard a door slamming open. I spun around to see a man — no, just a lad, and in his nightclothes — rushing at me with a sword in his hand. "Thief!" he was shouting.

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I acted on a soldier's reflex, bringing up a pistol and firing almost before I knew what was happening. The report was deafening in the small room. The boy fell backward, his heart's blood spraying the walls, while I stared at my smoking pistol in shock, then down at him. Who was he? She had said there was no one here! And somehow this lad did not quite have the look of an outlaw—

But I had no time to think. Two more of them were rushing at me, an older man and another man who looked like he might be the lad's brother. In the doorway, they stared down in horror at the sight of him lying dead on the floor, and then in a rage the younger one lunged for the sword next to the body. I had no room to retreat, and the expression on his face was murderous. As he came at me with the sword, I discharged my second pistol.

I hadn't planned for anything like this to happen; I hadn't wanted any more bloodshed. Now all I could think of was escape. The older man, in the hallway, was half-collapsed against the wall, uttering inarticulate sounds of grief and rage. I judged him no threat and pushed past him, but suddenly she appeared in the doorway, and her eyes glinted with such vicious satisfaction that I caught my breath. Then, behind me, came the cry, "My sons! Curse you! Curse you! Witch! Serpent-Tongue!"

"Kill him," she shrilled, and I spun around to see the old man coming at me with the sword raised over his head. I stumbled, off-balance, twisting aside, and the blade struck me a glancing blow in the shoulder. On the floor, I fumbled with my left hand for the third pistol still in my boot top, pulled it free just as he raised the sword again, and fired.

I struggled to my feet, badly shaken. All three of the outlaws — if they were in fact outlaws — were dead. Blood spattered the walls and ran down to the floor. My right arm was hanging at my side, and I reached for the doorframe to steady myself. My pistol dropped from numb fingers as I stared directly into her green eyes. "You lied! You said no one was here! I told you I didn't want any more killing!"

"They should have been asleep! I made certain. . . ." Her voice suddenly softened. "Captain! You're hurt!" Her fingertips on the back of my head made me flinch. "You're bleeding. Let me tend to it."

I pushed her away. I was still shaking with shock and rage. She'd lied, sending me back there! Now three lay dead, and it might have been me, in their place.

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But she clung to me, murmuring, "You were so brave. . . ." Her lips brushed against my ear. The rip in her shift had fallen open again, and I couldn't tear my eyes away from the sight of her bare white breast. Her hands moved lower, started to unfasten my doublet. My breath was coming more quickly. It was impossible to ignore the mound of her sex pressing against me.

Her deceit suddenly meant nothing as she grasped the hem of her shift and pulled it quickly up over her head. The supple length of her body curved into mine. Her hips moved in sinuous urgings. My organ was swollen within the constraints of my codpiece. Swift and merciful, her fingers freed it. "My Captain," she whispered, "my brave Captain."

I pulled her down onto me. Silken white thighs clamped around my hips, and her mouth sought my neck, my lips. Her teeth bit down, bruising my mouth. "Oh Lady," I gasped.

I was all too quickly spent, and overcome with a sudden profound weariness. "My Captain," she whispered again, withdrawing from me, but now her tone was mocking. The weight of my lids was too heavy to let me open my eyes.

My dreams were disordered. I coupled with a serpent. Its body, sinuous and cool, curled around my own. Its tongue flickered in and out, and its green eyes were almond-shaped. "My Captain," it hissed softly, while fangs sank into my lips.

I woke heavy-limbed, with a headache and a strange, metallic taste in my mouth. Sitting upright was agony, and the sunlight hurt my eyes. How much wine. . . .

Then I remembered. Ignoring the rush of dizziness, I stumbled to my feet. The door to the gallery stood open, but I turned away from it, to call out her name. . . .

But she had never told me who she was. "Lady?" I called out uncertainly. The echo of my voice rang in the empty hall, and I suddenly felt an edge of panic, realizing how I must have been drugged, or somehow bespelled — betrayed!

Remembering my horse, I ran outside, but it was nowhere to be found, not in the stable or the yard. Gone, and my saddlebags with it — all I owned in the world!

"Lady!" I called again, out of pure desperation. There was her chest, her dowry; surely she wouldn't leave without it! I went back to the gallery,

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where the brassbound chest stood with its top flung open, empty.

At my feet the body of the old man, frozen in a grotesque posture of death, told me how long I had been insensible. My empty pistols lay where they had fallen, but I couldn't bring myself to pick them up. I turned and walked away, out the door, past my saber lying broken on the hearth. My heart was a numb weight in my chest.

There was a familiar, harsh cry from above, and a huge raven came flying past my head, so close I could feel the brush of air from its wings, and I shivered like a man touched by death.

The forest swallowed me up. I was still lost, and now, on foot, I began to encounter new difficulties. I was weakened from blood loss, my shoulder was useless, throbbing with pain, and my high-topped cavalry boots were not made for long marches across broken ground. There was no path to lead me out of this place; I was unarmed, with no provisions. I set my teeth and limped on until I began to fear I might lose my way in the dark. My bed that night was a windswept heap of damp leaves, my supper a handful of worm-eaten nutmeats from the ground. As a soldier, I was accustomed to hardship, but I knew that even if my wounds didn't fester, I would be facing starvation unless I could find my way out of the forest within a few more days.

Over my head, I saw a raven settle in the branches, but I was too weary to care.

DAWN WOKE me the next day, shivering and empty-bellied. I started to pull on my boots, but the sight of my raw, bloodied feet made me gasp aloud. I managed to cut down the tops of my boots and tear up my shirt to bandage my feet before I forced them back on, but walking was torture. Still, I limped on. If I remained where I was, I would die.

The forest seemed to grow denser in every direction. I began to wonder if I was walking in circles. How could I have so badly lost my way? It was impossible for me to cover more than a few leagues in a day. And in the nights, my dreams were haunted by green eyes. White thighs parted to receive my member; a flickering tongue enflamed my lust. But when I spilled my seed, it sprouted into a legion of serpents. They emerged from the writhing entrails of the dead, and they left trails of blood behind them as they crawled toward me. Their bodies coiled around mine.

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Their eyes were green, and their laughter was mocking.

Toward the end, I would have gratefully welcomed the sight of even a bandit. There finally came a moment when I fell, and it was too much of an effort to get to my knees. I lay almost senseless, sinking into the numbness of death, and I think that soon nothing could have awakened me from it.

But the unmistakable carrion scent of the battlefield aroused me, and I opened my eyes to the vision of a raven perched on my chest, about to strike. Just in time, I managed to turn my head so it missed my eye. I struggled up to my elbow and wiped away the blood where its beak had torn my face.

On the branch overhead, the raven stretched its wings and croaked angrily. I picked up a stick and flung it weakly, missing the bird. "Curse you, I'm not dead yet!"

"You think not? Look at your heart, soldier!"

Somehow it did not seem remarkable that the raven had spoken. Slowly, I put my hand to the heavy ache in my chest. No, I thought. Not when it still hurt so.

After a moment the raven nodded its black head. "So be it. I can wait."

My heart felt no lighter as I watched it fly away, but from somewhere I found the strength once again to crawl on. Before long, it seemed that the forest was growing thinner, and at last I came on a well-trodden path. I passed the night in the hut of a charcoal burner, who had pity on a crippled soldier and let him share his meager supper.

I felt stronger enough the next day to walk leaning on a stick, and so I limped down the path the way the charcoal burner had shown me, out of the forest. It was not long before I came to the top of a hill where I could look down on the walls and towers of a fine city. It had entirely escaped the destruction of the recent wars, the kind of place I had meant to find when I left my company with two hundred talers in my saddlebags.

But now I was entering the city as a crippled beggar, barely able to walk. I had lost the remains of my boots somewhere back in the forest, and my clothing was worn to rags. Able-bodied former soldiers already filled the streets, seeking what work there was to be had. Although I slowly healed, I was reduced to fighting the dogs for the offal in the gutters. Despair weighted my heart like lead. The few pennies I managed to beg went for wine instead of bread, for my dreams had followed me

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from the forest — serpents, and blood, and lies. She — *she* had reduced me to this state!

I woke one morning to find the raven perched on the roof of the hovel where I slept. I cursed, I groped for a rock to fling at it, but the bird merely flew away, unscathed, while I wept in rage and wretchedness.

But that same day, while I was crossing the market square, I heard the clatter of hoofbeats on the cobbles. People scattered to safety as they rounded the corner, two outriders first, then four matched grays pulling a large gilded coach. I was still limping, and I only just managed to throw myself out of danger. Lying on the slick cobbles, I shivered at the sound of familiar laughter, and I looked up to catch an instant's glimpse of her through the window of the coach. One look was enough. There was no mistaking that face, those almond-shaped green eyes. Pain savaged my heart.

"Who is she?" I demanded, seizing the coat of the nearest onlooker and screaming, "In the coach — who is she?"

The man knocked my hand away. "Look at the beggar!" he laughed scornfully. "He wants his bride!"

How had he known! How could this stranger know what had happened back in that house in the forest? But around me the whole marketplace laughed, sharing a great joke at my expense. "Here's the best suitor yet!" they jeered. "We'll see a wedding this time for sure!"

At last, bitterly humiliated, I retrieved my stick from the gutter and limped away out of the square.

"Do you want to know who she is?"

The raven! I almost fell as I lunged forward to strike it, but the bird evaded me easily.

"Do you want to know her name?"

"Yes! Tell me!" I hissed, gripping my stick so tightly I thought the wood would snap.

The raven ruffled its feathers contemptuously. "Her name is Ludovine, the Princess Ludovine. Prince Ludwig's only sister. They say," it went on, "that she has a reputation for sorcery."

I said nothing.

"I can take you to her," the raven went on.

It mocked me. It wished me no good. I knew it. But when it stretched out its wings, saying, "Follow me," I limped after it. I wanted nothing

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from her, I told myself, nothing but what had been mine. The very thought of her touch made me shudder in revulsion.

It was a modest palace, the seat of a minor prince, but uniformed guards stood at attention before its gates. One of them put out an arm to stop me. "There's no room for any stinking beggars here!"

"But I have to see her — the princess, Ludovine," I insisted wildly, trying to get around him and through the gate. "She knows who I am—"

A blow staved in my breath, knocking me backward to the pavement. A kick followed for emphasis. I barely managed to protect my wounded arm. "Maybe you didn't hear me," the guard said.

As I stumbled away, the raven settled its weight on my shoulder. "Your bride seems to have forgotten you."

I cursed its mockery. But the next day I waited outside the palace until I saw her coach driving up to the gates. When it slowed, I rushed forward and held on to the door, saying, "Lady! Princess! You remember me! The forest!"

Her green eyes met mine for an instant, and even at that moment, I could feel my lust rising unbidden, despite myself. Then she turned away, and the coach lurched forward, knocking me from the other side of the gate. At the sight of the cudgels they were carrying, I tried to run, but it was no use. They beat me until I could barely crawl.

"She doesn't seem to want to remember you," said the raven. "Not very grateful, is she?"

I moaned, spitting out a couple of broken, bloody teeth. "I saved her," I said hoarsely. "And she lied, she betrayed me, she stole everything I owned, and left me to die in the forest." Oh, and I could still recall the touch of her hand on my bare flesh, the whisper of her voice: *My Captain, my brave Captain! Don't you want your bride!* It was too much to bear.

"Then it's vengeance you want," said the raven.

"I want what's mine! I want what she stole from me!" I insisted savagely.

But no magistrate would listen to a beggar's accusations against the prince's sister. The raven commiserated while I tried to drown my wretchedness in wine, and it whispered strange tales of the Princess Ludovine.

The princess had had many suitors but no bridegroom. Many of the lords who had sought her hand had died under mysterious circumstances. It was rumored, said the raven, that she set them impossible tasks in order to win her favor. But her brother the prince refused to hear anything said against her.

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"Then how did I come to find her half-naked, chained in the forest?" I asked bitterly.

"Earlier this year a young lord came to the palace. His lineage was noble, but his family had fallen into poverty, and he wanted the marriage to restore their fortune. When he was lost, his father the old duke and his two brothers swore vengeance. Shortly afterward three armed men overtook the princess's coach and carried her away. She was missing. . . ."

"Until some fool rescued her," I said grimly. So they had not, after all, been bandits.

"Do you want to hear the rest?"

I glared at it, but the raven went on, "There's a new suitor now, and this time the wedding date is set. They say that the prince insists. There have been too many dark lately. In two days' time, the Princess Ludovine will be married. Unless. . . ."

It paused. Its bright eye mocked me.

"What do you mean?"

It hopped a step sideways, out of my reach. "Do you want vengeance, soldier?" it croaked.

"I want only what was mine," I started to protest once more, but even as I spoke, I knew it was a lie. Oh, I wanted her to suffer as I had suffered, to pay for betraying me, for cursing my dreams with the memory of her touch! My hands clenched into fists so tightly they hurt. The raven was watching me. Its black eyes glittered.

"Tell me," I demanded. "Tell me how."

I straightened as I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the basin of water I had just used to wash myself. With my hair and beard trimmed, I looked like a soldier again. The raven had provided the clothes. First it had brought back a shirt clutched in its claws, the linen still slightly damp from the wash. Next a russet-colored doublet with silver buttons that a lord would not have scorned to wear. And last, one by one, a pair of cavalryman's boots.

I pulled them on carefully, marveling at the fit. I stood; I strode down the alley, then back. My limp was gone. No man would call me a beggar now. It occurred to me at that moment that I could leave this place and rejoin my company. Or find other work, here in the city. Was this not what I had left the wars to find: a new life?

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I stared at the raven, watching it preen itself. What price would it demand for this help? But just then it fixed me with a glittering black eye. "Did you dream well last night?"

I shuddered with the memory. The empty eyes of the dead lord had stared at me in reproach while the walls ran crimson with his sons' blood. A serpent slithered from his eye sockets and whispered lies, but now I knew her for what she was, and she could never deceive me again.

And the raven — the raven knew.

The air began to ring with the sound of church bells. The wedding was at hand. The entire town had turned out for the celebration. The way the princess would come was strewn with flowers. I trampled them under my boots as I came to the cathedral and stood next to the entrance, the raven perched on my shoulder.

An upswell of cheering announced the approach of the bride. It grew louder as the wedding procession began to pass by me into the cathedral — lords, ladies all dressed in gleaming finery. Then the bridegroom, some hapless lordling too astonished at his good fortune to wonder at his fate. Finally, on the arm of her brother the prince —

My breath caught in my throat; my heart seemed to stop beating. Even beneath her bridal veil, I could still see those almond-shaped green eyes. . . .

Claws pierced my shoulder through my sleeve. Despite the press of the crowd, I squeezed my way through into the cathedral's nave, where the wedding ceremony had begun.

"Wait!" All eyes turned in my direction. The prince whirled around with his hand on the hilt of his sword, and his face was murderous. But even as his retainers advanced toward me, the raven cried aloud, *Serpent-Tongue!*

I knew who it was then; I knew it at last. And I was both the object and instrument of his revenge.

At the raven's cry, the prince seemed to freeze. I brushed him aside, stepped up to the sorceress clothed as a bride, and ripped her veil away from her face. Her eyes glittered with hate, and she let out a small hiss as she tried to claw my face, but I cried out, "Let the whole world see what you really are!" And with both my hands, I tore her gown open down the front.

Instead of cream-white skin, there were green-and-gold patterned

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scales. Instead of rose-tipped breasts, the smooth, sinuous length of a serpent, as beautiful as it was deadly. Only her face was still human, with her yellow curls tumbled down her back, but her green eyes were ophidian and cold.

Through the roaring in my ears, I could hear screams. The prince stood rigid and white-faced; the unfortunate, horrified bridegroom stumbled backward out of my sight. She struggled to escape my grip, but I held her fast while I turned to face the bishop. "This is my bride. Our union has already been consummated, but now you can give it your blessing."

The wedding ring, as the raven had instructed me, was of iron, and I clamped it around her neck. Once again she was confined, as I had found her in the forest.

When the ceremony was over, I dragged my bride from the cathedral and brought her to the hovel where I lived. With the iron around her neck, she no longer had the shape of a serpent. Her naked body in its human form was as seductive as ever, but I hardened my eyes against it. Taking out my knife, I forced open her mouth and slit her tongue from the root to the tip. "Now you can tell no more lies."

And I rejoiced in my vengeance.

I still have the stick I used as a beggar. My bride is well acquainted with it. Her skin is no longer white and smooth, but otherwise she looks just as she did when I first saw her, even to the condition of her shift. The soldiers often tear it when they use her, but they pay well enough — enough to keep me in wine. I need wine. My dreams are very dark.

I see her flinch when I reach for the stick, but I feel nothing. There is an empty place in my chest that even her most pitiable cries cannot bring back to life.

The raven alone — the raven is content.

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BOOKS

ALGIS BUDRYS

The Dark Beyond the Stars, Frank M. Robinson, Tor, $19.95

Serpent Catch, Dave Wolverton, Bantam, $4.99

Plus an un-named Bantam book.

IT WAS forty years ago that Frank M. Robinson wrote *The Power*, which attracted the scorn of Damon Knight, who was then reviewing books. Well, Frank M. Robinson lived out in the Middle West, somewhere, which meant he was not part of the Eastern Establishment which then existed, and he was working in the mailroom at Ziff-Davis Publications in the days when these two parents (B. G. Davis eventually bought *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* from Joe Ferman, another parent, and in due course gave it to his son, Joel, on the East Coast) these two parents, as I say, were publishing *Amazing Stories* (and a flock of others) in Chicago, and what it boiled down to for Frankie was that he was not entitled to protection from Damon Knight (who, after all, had been living in New York for some time, perhaps as much as five years, since leaving Hood River, Oregon).

In due course, *The Power* sold to George Pal, who was making interesting science fiction movies — *When Worlds Collide* was another of them — and he made an interesting one out of it.

Then Frankie went to work for William Lawrence Hamling, after Hamling left Ziff-Davis and Ziff-Davis moved to New York, and in due course Frankie became Managing Editor of *Rogue* Magazine, in the days when it (briefly) rivalled *Playboy*. And I met him in 1961, having left New York for Chicagoland, and having become thereby Editor-in-Chief of Regency Books, a small paperback originals house and another Hamling arm. (And having therefore followed Harlan Ellison into that position, but if we go into *that*, the cast of characters here will grow all out of proportion.)

Well, this is very strange, because 1961 — late 1961 — was

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thirty years ago, as near as damn it, and here I am, no more than a day or two over thirty, and Frankie is maybe 34, but he lives in San Francisco, and has for years, and I live in Los Angeles a lot of the time, and Damon Knight lives in Eugene, Oregon, and I saw the two of them not two days apart very recently, and yet we are none of us any older. But perhaps it is best to let that go unexamined any further.

At any rate, many other adventures followed 1961, including Frank and I taking turns at working for *Playboy*, and Frankie putting out the last respectable issue of *Rogue* with some help from me, and then I went to work in Chicago public relations and Frank moved out to the West Coast, and what I want to say most of all is that Frank very likely has been my best friend for thirty years, which is half my life. Which, among other things, enables me to say that *The Dark Beyond the Stars* is one hell of a book. (I'm not sure about *The Power.*) And it doesn't matter to Frank one way or the other, or at least he says it doesn't. Because Frank, if you remember your more recent history, is also co-author, with Tom Scortia, of *The Glass Inferno*, which became more than half of *The Towering Inferno*, the film, and of several other filmed projects, and of several other books in collaboration with Scortia and others, which is why he can afford to live in a house in San Francisco with lots of lovely panelling and bevelled glass, and a collection of old pulps that would turn your head right around.

But Frank is a peculiar guy, in that he noted one day that the old SF is getting scarce. And it is. Oh, Asimov still writes it, sort of, and Silverberg still says he writes it, but he writes many other kinds as well. Jack Williamson is very much still around, and even L. Sprague de Camp, but, really, what with one thing and another, Frank is right enough. So, Frank decided to do something about it, and the result is *The Dark Beyond the Stars*, the story of a generation ship far from home, far from anything, trudging from planet to planet, two thousand years out, more or less and allowing for time dilation, and in all that time it has found nothing; not a trace of life.

And it is getting very old, and now the Captain wants to head it across the Dark, an empty space perhaps ten generations utterly devoid of solar systems, for the sake of the older, more crowded stars on the other side, where he — and few others — believe there must be life.

In the sub-genre of generation ship stories, like the original Heinlein "Universe," most ships this old

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have reverted to barbarism, with no thought to the outside, unknowingly a-sail through an uncaring ocean of stars while God knows what purely internalized battles for control of three corridors and a wall deck rage inside. Much rarer is the story in which a sense of the original purpose persists, and this is one of them. But Robinson has taken care of that — the Captain is immortal, and has served from Day One. Furthermore, it fairly soon becomes clear that another crew member, now called Sparrow, is in fact immortal too; he undergoes brain flatlining every twenty years or so, and each time gradually learns a new identity. Unbeknownst to him for quite some time, he does this because he is the icon — the one other crew member who, underneath it all, remembers Earth, and at least acts like an Earthman, and so provides the rest of the crew with a stick to measure themselves against, lest they grow too strange.

The story is told from Sparrow's point of view, and it includes a great deal more than that, especially Thrush, who plays many parts. And by and large I will leave you to discover most of its additional surprises for yourselves, because, as advertised, this is a book without apparent style — but with actually impeccable style — and it is a book which depends for its effect on the working out of its surprises.

It cannot startle us with its idea, because its idea has been done before — even by Robinson, in an otherwise unrelated novelette many years ago — and the idea is inherently limited, if interesting. The only reason one would read such a book is to see what variations this particular author has hung on the idea, and, if it is going to be a long book in particular — which this one is — it had better provide plenty of those, and none of them can be clangers.

Well, fortunately, as I said several paragraphs ago, the book is quite good. And it is the pure quill as far as "modern" science fiction goes, which means it is of a mode which came to life about 1939 and, while not dead — no mode in science fiction, once found, is ever completely abandoned — is pretty much out of the mainstream and has been increasingly so since about 1959. Will it cause a revolution and bring us all back to those comparatively innocent times? No, because with the exception of a few survivors of that time, nobody can write it fluently and naturally any more; it is always a stunt now, when attempted. It is, really, a case of Frank Robinson, the icon, standing among you and showing you how it was done in the old days of, say, 1945.

Mainly because Frank is un-

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usual. In the first place, he writes a vigorous, declarative style that tells you without question he is no older than 34, or 35 at most; in the second, because he is so good a writer, so fluent in many different styles and modes of storytelling, that you will not credit this — you will assume, despite everything I have told you, that this is the way Frank writes all the time. So be it. I think he writes unusually well all the time; that is not the same thing; so be it.

More than anything else, Frank succeeds at least with me. This is a complicated story, but it does not seem so. It seems to just go along, unravelling (when it is actually doing the exact opposite) pleasantly, and when you have finished it, you have gone a long way and seen much. That used to be one of the quintessential thrills of science fiction, nor is it gone, but it *is* unusual to see it writ so plain, or so well, and I thank you, Frank.

Serpent Catch is Dave Wolverton's second novel, coming after the widely acclaimed *On My Way to Paradise*, and like the first it is the story of a Journey. But rather than a tale set in an ultratechnological milieu, it is set on an extrasolar planet which has been terraformed, seeded with life, additionally populated with stranded starfarers when a puissant alien race suddenly appeared and interdicted all traffic off the surface, and now, after centuries, is a backwater, concerned completely only with what takes place on it, forgotten by the starfarers if they still exist at all — on the planet, only one is left alive, quasi-immortal — and, as it turns out, now in terminal trouble.

When originally set up, everyone existed in a more or less separate enclave. The dinosaurs, for instance, could not reach the humans, or the neanderthals, because the sea teemed with serpents which were genetically bred to eat dinosaur. Similarly, dragons existed to eat the pterodactyls, or whatever. But the dragons are getting funny, humans and neanderthals interbred, a little, the slavers are pushing out from their land by the millions and making their presence very much felt, the dryads and the Mastodon Men and the giant women ... well, you get the idea. But the worst thing is that the serpents are dying, and plesiosaurs are getting in among the humans and neanderthals of the Rough. In a desperate attempt to restore the balance, Scandal the Innkeeper, and an oddly assorted bunch including Tull, the half-human, half-neanderthal who cannot escape the shadow of his battered childhood, set out in a wagon, drawn by a borrowed stegosaur, with a huge barrel, on a long journey

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to capture a bunch of serpents and bring them back to the bay to breed.

And lots, and lots, of things go wrong.

It is a very long book, about 145,000 words, and it concerns itself with many, many subplots without losing sight of its objective, and in the end Tull and the girl he should have married are, indeed, married. (Whether they will live happily ever after, no one can say. But I doubt if they will have a storybook life.)

I do not think it is as successful a book as *On My Way to Paradise.* There are too many subplots, and not all of them are worked out in accordance with their evident weight. That is, some appear scamped, and some appear to have been too lovingly detailed. But it is a good enough book, and the third one — presumably as different from *Serpent Catch* and *On My Way to Paradise* as *Serpent Catch* is from *On My Way to Paradise* — is on its way. The thing no one doubts about Dave Wolverton is that he is pursuing a career that will produce many good books over many years to come.

Incidentally, the chapters in *Serpent Catch* are decorated with simple but effective illustrations by Derek Hegsted, the 1989 winner of the L. Ron Hubbard Illustrators of the Future grand prize.* Oddly enough, Wolverton seems to have paid for these illustrations himself.

We come to a peculiar case which it is no pleasure to tell you about.

In a month or so, you will be offered a Bantam book, by a writer whose name you will recognize from his many recent appearances in these pages and elsewhere, which is this good, to say the least, writer's first novel.

It is, I think, a good story. In fact, it is a very promising first novel, up to the point where you turn the page in mid-stream and discover that this is all there is. If you want more, you are going to have to wait for the next book. And

* Both Hegsted and Wolverton are Mormons, and both live in Provo, UT; Wolverton is a winner of the L. Ron Hubbard writers' contest grand prize. Nobody can explain why this is: Hegsted and Wolverton didn't even know each other, though Wolverton did and does know M. Shayne Bell and Virginia Baker, the other two winners of First Places in the writers' contest from Provo, all Mormons, so far. What I am saying is that four winners of two L. Ron Hubbard contests live within a few miles of each other, all four are Mormons, and, really, no one knows what this means. Except that it may not have stopped — there is a lively and energetic colony of would-be writers, and, presumably, a similar group of would-be artists, in Provo.

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this is obviously not just a series —this is a case where the first book simply reaches a certain page count and stops, in medias res. Nothing, really, has resolved. None of the promises the book makes have been kept. They well may be, in the next book. But I don't think this is fair to the reader, and I don't think it's fair to the writer. So I called up the writer — I know him well — and discovered that he had done this deliberately; that he felt the book had a great deal more to it, that he couldn't and shouldn't attempt to resolve it in this volume, and that, therefore, he had done what he had done.

A little stunned, I then asked him about something else; the milieu in which the book is set for the most part is a spire of land, several miles high, on a planet which is otherwise low and uninhabitable. It seems that the Terrestrial robot ship which found it just happened to land on it, and send back a message saying the planet was habitable by humans, when for the overwhelming most part, it is not. But of course it's too late for the humans who were immediately dispatched to it.

It turns out the author of this book has never heard of the Larry Niven novel of several years ago which used the identical gimmick. This may or may not trouble Larry, as it may or may not additionally trouble him that a minor character, for no good reason, is a wirehead. Until I made the phone call, no way could I believe the writer wasn't performing some act of homage to Niven, lacking only a payoff of some sort, which might appear in the second half of this book.

Now, I am absolutely certain that this is simply a case of a bad decision by an uncommonly good writer, compounded by an unfortunate coincidence. It's just a shame it has to happen with his first novel, because *I* think it's a career setback, even though hardly a fatal one. But I would like to ask his editor some questions about her knowledge of the field, and her judgment.

Unfortunately, she is not returning my calls.

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Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

Russian Spring, Norman Spinrad (Bantam, cloth, 660pp)

EVERY NOW and then, being a novelist myself really gets in the way of my role as a reviewer. For instance, a reviewer is supposed to rejoice upon reading what is almost certain to be *the* book of the year. But what if that reviewer is also a novelist who harbored fond hopes of his *own* novel making a few waves? Never mind —I grit my teeth and smile and tell you what many others will doubtless be saying before the year is out. Norman Spinrad has gone and written the novel that shows us all what the best of 90s science fiction can be.

Jerry Reed is an American who grew up dreaming of space — a science fiction cliche, indeed, but made charmingly real in the first chapter of Norman Spinrad's *Russian Spring*. Jerry goes into the American space program the way other kids go into the family business. But something goes awry. The civilian space program has been derailed, and he finds himself working to develop a space transport for the military. Not that he hates the military, particularly — it just has nothing to do with his dream of going into space himself.

That is when the space agency of a fully united Europe tries to seduce him into joining their program to develop a civilian space bus to carry people from low orbit out to geosynchronous orbit — and beyond. They sweeten the offer with a lavish all-expenses visit to Paris, where Jerry meets the novel's other protagonist.

Sonya Gagarin has no noble principles, or at least none that she has detected. She left her lover and her supposed commitment to a foreign-service career the moment that the Soviet Union's foreign holding company, Red Star, offered her a high-paying job in Brussels. It was everything she'd dreamed of — money, freedom, fun — but she is vaguely ashamed of herself for her lack of a higher dream. Thus when she and Jerry Reed have a rather comic and sexy encounter, she is attracted to

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the fact that he would do almost anything for the chance to get into space.

An old friend of Jerry's once told him, *You can walk on water, but you have to give up everything else to do it.* Gradually Jerry finds out that it's true, as he is forced to give up his passport, his homeland, his citizenship, and, for a time, his family and his self-respect, all for the dream of going into space. And yet when the time comes for the final push, he finds that not only can *he* go into space, but in a sense he can take all of America with him, and Russia and Europe as well.

It's no accident that this novel is the first major new work of Spinrad's to appear since his move to Paris. His love for that fabled city is plain, and not just in the perhaps-overdone guided tour of the city that we get in some of the early chapters. For Spinrad has clearly wrestled, as his male protagonist wrestles, with the contradiction between a genuine love for his native land and a seething rage at what that nation is becoming. Neither Spinrad nor Jerry Reed has rejected America — Indeed, no one knows as well as an expatriate does what love and longing for one's country really means. Yet decent citizens cannot let that love-of-the-motherland supersede their public conscience. "Public conscience" is a clumsy term, I know, but I had to coin it because it's a virtue that desperately needs a name, if only to point out that many people seem to have a serious shortage of it. Folks whose private consciences are scrupulous to a fine degree — they'd spend a 29-cent stamp to repay a 10-cent debt — nevertheless feel no sense of personal responsibility for their nation's wrongdoing on the grand scale.

Spinrad has no shortage of public conscience, and in a sense public conscience can be seen as the overarching theme of *Russian Spring.* Most of the time, most of the characters act, as most people do, out of self-interest. Yet now and then a nobler dream turns this woman or that man onto a slightly different course. And we see, as the novel unfolds, how the world can be made a decent place by just those flashes of decency.

This is easily Spinrad's most readable book. Except for a few brief lapses into travel writing, every moment of the novel matters. His writing is finely tuned, but you are never forced to admire his style; instead, you feel that you are living inside the characters, inside the world of this book, with his language as your utterly trustworthy but invisible guide. And within a very few pages you care about these people, and keep on caring about them, more and more, until at the end — unless

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you are a great deal more hard-hearted than *this* jaded reader — you will have to stop reading to blink away tears of sorrow and tears of joy. This is not a dispassionate, "aesthetic" novel. Nor, however, is it a grab-your-balls action thriller. Nothing in this novel requires you to become momentarily stupid in order to to enjoy it. And there is much about it that might have the power to make you *this* much wiser, *that* much more compassionate.

One of the great pleasures of reading this book is that Spinrad actually understands global politics — not just the situation now, but the principles by which nations move, so that his future history feels absolutely true. I had thought only Bruce Sterling knew how to pull off that trick. Furthermore, Spinrad understands political machinations and bureaucratic systems well enough to show the brilliance and nobility possible within them, as well as the stupidity and slime. I had thought only Jack McDevitt knew how to do *that*.

Alas, the book is not perfect (or at least, not perfect for *me*). Besides the overconcern with Parisian menus, I was also disappointed at the way he used sex early on in the relationship between Jerry and Sonya. I wasn't offended, I just thought it got kind of silly when Jerry's mind is made up to stay in Paris because Sonya is willing to go all the way with fellatio. It reminded me of the ludicrous way Irving Wallace handled sex in his early-70s pot-boiler *The Word*, in which reading the miraculous fifth gospel gave everybody really good orgasms. I laughed, but it was only a brief lapse and easily overlooked.

Much more disappointing was the brief passage in which Spinrad recapitulates the history of the United States since 1960. His grasp of geopolitics had been so sophisticated and subtle up to then that I could hardly believe it when I found his "analysis" to be the most puerile sort of black-and-white good-guys-vs.-bad-guys paranoid-conspiracy theory. The CIA killed Kennedy so he couldn't prevent the Vietnam War ... right. Again, though, Spinrad quickly gets off this knee-jerk 70s-liberal kick and back to the future history that grew out of intelligent analysis instead of anger.

Indeed, though the characters are memorable and the story powerful, what may be Spinrad's most remarkable achievement is the development of a fully realized future history. He actually takes us, virtually step by step, from where we are today to where we could be a generation from now, and he does it so well that I —who up to now have found precious few future histories that were any better than laughable — found

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myself nodding and saying, Could be, could be. Current events *will* catch up with him, but not as quickly as you might expect: For instance, there's no mention of the Gulf War in *Russian Spring*, and indeed, the novel might have been written entirely before that war took place — and yet the Gulf War is exactly the *kind* of thing that Spinrad's future America could do, and if we let our euphoria at victory lead us to become global bullies, his vision of a morally and economically bankrupt America may be far more accurate than any of us would wish.

Showing global events is one of the hardest things to do in science fiction, and most sf writers fail miserably; I wince as I read their depictions of government meetings that could never happen and political leaders who would never survive for a moment in the real world of politics. Spinrad's characters, on the other hand — even the most extravagant ones, like his weird-but-wonderful American vice-president, Wolfowitz (where is this guy when I want to *vote* for him?) — might very well chart their strange course through the real world of politics. In short, Spinrad almost never offends history. And that alone would make this novel a textbook in How It's Done When You Do It Right.

I've gone on at great length about *Russian Spring*, but I assure you that the review you're reading is the edited-down version. I kept making marginal notes about things I wanted to mention in this review, and I've touched on very few of them, and yet I've already used up space I should have devoted to three or four books, according to my original mandate. But heck, Norman Spinrad's *Russian Spring* is *worth* three or four ordinary books, and if you're smart enough to buy it in hardcover it'll *cost* as much, too.

If this novel isn't on the Hugo and Nebula ballots next year, the voters should slap themselves silly. But who cares? It's far more important that *Russian Spring* end up in your memory, helping shape your view of the world. Because we're all going to live through the next few decades together, and I'd rather do it with people who've seen the future through Spinrad's jaundiced eye.

But don't read it out of a sense of duty. Read it because it's as good and strong a story as you're likely to find this year. Read it because Norman Spinrad, of all people, actually leads up to a climactic scene where you get the lyrics of "God Bless America" absolutely straight, complete with the lump in your throat and the tear in your eye. Read it because despite all the pain and suffering, both public and private, in *Russian Spring*, it will leave you full of hope and joy.

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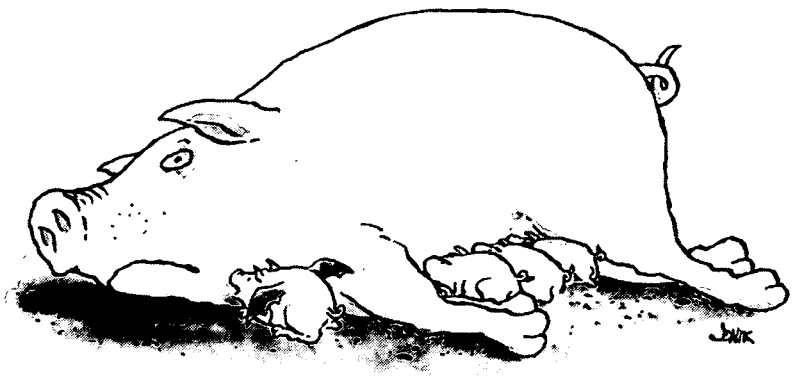
Science Fiction: The Early Years, Everett F. Bleiler (Kent State University Press, cloth, 998pp, $75.00)

Most of you aren't about to spring for seventy-five bucks for *any* book, let alone a heavy reference tome like this, but I'll tell you, folks, if you're lucky enough to live near a library that *does* buy it, go in and give yourself a treat. Bleiler's goal was to catalogue and synopsize *all* the science fiction published before Hugo Gernsback created the field as a commercial genre.

The project is more than a little wacko from the start, of course, if only because there were no clearly defined genre lines back then, so that Bleiler constantly has to decide whether to include a book or not based on criteria that would have been meaningless to the authors at the time. But he had to draw a line somewhere. And I'm glad this book exists. It's wonderful fun to browse through it and read Bleiler's brief plot summaries, which often include his entertainingly barbed critical commentary. Books this heavy usually don't feel so, well, *personal.*

I can't tell you how accurate or complete the book is, except that with those rare entries where I already knew the work he was writing about, he never missed. But as a guided tour to the era when all our field's cliches were still the cat's pajamas, I can't imagine a more pleasurable thousand pages than these.



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National news commentators looked tired by the middle of 1990. The Cold War had eased, the Soviet Block had released restrictions on its satellites and the world seemed a little warmer. Sometimes it seemed as if we had stepped into an alternate universe . . . at least until Iraq invaded Kuwait. Bruce Sterling's story, "The Unthinkable," returns to that place where the Cold War appears to have lost a bit of its edge — in a true alternate universe, filled with its own demons and nightmares.

The Unthinkable

By Bruce Sterling

SINCE THE STRATEGIC Arms Talks of the early 1970s, it had been the policy of the Soviets to keep to their own quarters as much as the negotiations permitted — in fear, the Americans surmised, of novel forms of technical eavesdropping.

Dr. Tsyganov's Baba Yaga hut now crouched warily on the meticulously groomed Swiss lawn. Dr. Elwood Doughty assembled a hand of cards and glanced out the hut's window. Protruding just above the sill was the great scaly knee of one of the hut's six giant chicken legs, a monstrous knobby member as big around as an urban water main. As Doughty watched, the chicken knee flexed restlessly, and the hut stirred around them, rising with a seasick lurch, then settling with a squeak of timbers and a rustle of close-packed thatch.

Tsyganov discarded, drew two cards from the deck, and examined them, his wily blue eyes shrouded in greasy wisps of long graying hair. He

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plucked his shabby beard with professionally black-rimmed nails.

Doughty, to his pleased surprise, had been dealt a straight flush in the suit of Wands. With a deft pinch, he dropped two ten-dollar bills from the top of the stack at his elbow.

Tsyganov examined his dwindling supply of hard currency with a look of Slavic fatalism. He grunted, scratched, then threw his cards faceup on the table. Death. The Tower. The deuce, trey, and five of Coins.

"Chess?" Tsyganov suggested, rising.

"Another time," said Doughty. Though, for security reasons, he lacked any official ranking in the chess world, Doughty was in fact quite an accomplished chess strategist, particularly strong in the end game. Back in the marathon sessions of '83, he and Tsyganov had dazzled their fellow arms wizards with an impromptu tournament lasting almost four months, while the team awaited (fruitlessly) any movement on the stalled verification accords. Doughty could not outmatch the truly gifted Tsyganov, but he had come to know and recognize the flow of his opponent's thought.

Mostly, though, Doughty had conceived a vague loathing for Tsyganov's prized personal chess set, which had been designed on a Reds versus Whites Russian Civil War theme. The little animate pawns uttered tiny, but rather dreadful, squeaks of anguish, when set upon by the commissar bishops and cossack knights.

"'Another time?'" murmured Tsyganov, opening a tiny cabinet and extracting a bottle of Stolichnaya vodka. Inside the fridge a small, overworked frost demon glowered in its trap of coils and blew a spiteful gasp of cold fog. "There will not be many more such opportunities for us, Elwood."

"Don't I know it." Doughty noted that the Russian's vodka bottle bore an export label printed in English. There had been a time when Doughty would have hesitated to accept a drink in a Russian's quarters. Treason in the cup. Subversion potions. Those times already seemed quaint.

"I mean this will be over. History, grinding on. This entire business" —Tsyganov waved his sinewy hand, as if including not merely Geneva, but a whole state of mind — "will become a mere historical episode."

"I'm ready for that," Doughty said stoutly. Vodka splashed up the sides of his shot glass with a chill, oily threading. "I never much liked this life, Ivan."

"No?"

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"I did it for duty."

"Ah." Tsyganov smiled. "Nor for the travel privileges?"

"I'm going home," Doughty said. "Home for good. There's a place outside Fort Worth where I plan to raise cattle."

"Back to Texas?" Tsyganov seemed amused, touched. "The hard-line weapons theorist become a *farmer*, Elwood? You are a second Roman Cincinnatus!"

Doughty sipped vodka and examined the gold-flake socialist-realist icons hung on Tsyganov's rough timber walls. He thought of his own office, in the basement of the Pentagon. Relatively commodious, by basement standards. Comfortably carpeted. Mere yards from the world's weightiest centers of military power. Secretary of Defense. Joint Chiefs of Staff. Secretaries of the Army, Navy, Air Force. Director of Defense Research and Necromancy. The Lagoon, the Potomac, the Jefferson Memorial. The sight of pink dawn on the Capital Dome after pulling an all-nighter. Would he miss the place? No. "Washington, D.C. is no proper place to raise a kid."

"Ah." Tsyganov's peaked eyebrows twitched. "I heard you had married at last." He had, of course, read Doughty's dossier. "And your child, Elwood, he is strong and well?"

Doughty said nothing. It would be hard to keep the tone of pride from his voice. Instead, he opened his wallet of tanned basilisk skin and showed the Russian a portrait of his wife and infant son. Tsyganov brushed hair from his eyes and examined the portrait closely. "Ah," he said. "The boy much resembles you."

"Could be," Doughty said.

"Your wife," Tsyganov said politely, "has a very striking face."

"The former Jeane Seigel. Staffer on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee."

"I see. The defense intelligentsia?"

"She edited *Korea and the Theory of Limited War.* Considered one of the premier works on the topic."

"She must make a fine little mother." Tsyganov gulped his vodka, ripped into a crust of black rye bread. "My son is quite grown now. He writes for *Literaturnaya Gazeta.* Did you see his article on the Iraqi arms question? Some very serious developments lately concerning the Islamic jinni."

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There are still night gaunts and banshees downwind of the old test sites.

"I should have read it," Doughty said. "But I'm getting out of the game, Ivan. Out while the getting's good." The cold vodka was biting into him. He laughed briefly. "They're going to shut us down in the States. Pull our funding. Pare us back to the bone, and past the bone. 'Peace divided.' We'll all fade away. Like MacArthur. Like Robert Oppenheimer."

"'I am become Death, the Destroyer of Worlds,'" Tsyganov quoted.

"Yeah," Doughty mused. "That was too bad about poor old Oppy having to become Death."

Tsyganov examined his nails. "Will there be purges, you think?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I understand the citizens in Utah are suing your federal government. Over conduct of the arms tests, forty years ago. . . ."

"Oh," Doughty said. "The two-headed sheep, and all that. . . . There are still night gaunts and banshees downwind of the old test sites. Up in the Rockies . . . . Not a place to go during the full moon." He shuddered. "But 'purges?' No. That's not how it works for us."

"You should have seen the sheep around Chernobyl."

"'Bitter wormwood,'" Doughty quoted.

"No act of duty avoids its punishment." Tsyganov opened a can of dark fish that smelled like spiced kippered herring. "And what of the Unthinkable, eh? What price have you paid for *that* business?"

Doughty's voice was level, quite serious. "'We bear any burden in defense of freedom.'"

"Not the best of your American notions, perhaps." Tsyganov speared a chunk of fish from the can with a three-tined fork. "To deliberately contact an utterly alien entity from the abyss between universes. . . . An ultrademonic demigod whose very geometry is, as it were, an affront to sanity. . . . That Creature of nameless eons and inconceivable dimensions. . . ." Tsyganov patted his bearded lips with a napkin. "That hideous Radiance that bubbles and blasphemes at the center of all infinity—"

"You're being sentimental," Doughty said. "We must recall the historical circumstances in which the decision was made to develop the Azathoth Bomb. Giant Japanese Majins and Gojiras crashing through

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Asia. Vast squadrons of Nazi juggernauts blitzkrieging Europe. . . . And their undersea leviathans, preying on shipping. . . ."

"Have you ever seen a *modern* leviathan, Elwood?"

"Yes, I witnessed one. . . feeding. At the base in San Diego." Doughty could recall it with an awful clarity — the great finned navy monster, the barnacled pockets in its vast ribbed belly holding a slumbering cargo of hideous batwinged gaunts. On order from Washington, the minor demons would waken, slash their way free of the monster's belly, launch, and fly to their appointed targets with pitiless accuracy and the speed of a tempest. In their talons, they clutched triple-sealed spells that could open, for a few hideous microseconds, the portal between universes. And for an instant, the Radiance of Azathoth would gush through. And whatever that Color touched — wherever its unthinkable beam contacted earthly substance —the Earth would blister and bubble in cosmic torment. The very dust of the explosion would carry an unearthly taint.

"And have you seen them test the Bomb, Elwood?"

"Only underground. The atmospheric testing was rather before my time. . . ."

"And what of the poisoned waste, Elwood? From beneath the cyclopean walls of our scores of power plants. . . ."

"We'll deal with that. Launch it into the abyss of space, if we must." Doughty hid his irritation with an effort. "What are you driving at?"

"I worry, my friend. I fear that we've gone too far. We have been responsible men, you and I. We have labored in the service of responsible leaders. Fifty long years have passed, and not once has the Unthinkable been unleashed in anger. But we have trifled with the Eternal in pursuit of mortal ends. What is our pitiful fifty years in the eons of the Elder Gods? Now, it seems, we will rid ourselves of our foolish applications of this dreadful knowledge. But will we ever be clean?"

That's a challenge for the next generation. I've done what I can. I'm only mortal. I accept that."

"I do not think we can put it away. It is too close to us. We have lived in its shadow too long, and it has touched our souls."

"I'm through with it," Doughty insisted. "My duty is done. And I'm tired of the burden. I'm tired of trying to grasp issues, and imagine horrors, and feel fears and temptations, that are beyond the normal bounds of sane human contemplation. I've earned my retirement, Ivan. I have a right to a

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human life."

"The Unthinkable has touched you. Can you truly put that aside?"

"I'm a professional," Doughty said. "I've always taken the proper precautions. The best military exorcists have looked me over. . . . I'm clean."

"Can you know that?"

They're the best we have; I trust their professional judgment. . . . If I find the shadow in my life again, I'll put it aside. I'll cut it away. Believe me, I know the feel and smell of the Unthinkable — it'll never find a foothold in my life again. . . ." A merry chiming came from Doughty's right trouser pocket.

Tsyganov blinked, then went on. "But what if you find it is simply too close to you?"

Doughty's pocket rang again. He stood up absently. "You've known me for years, Ivan," he said, digging into his pocket. "We may be mortal men, but we were always prepared to take the necessary steps. We were prepared. No matter what the costs."

Doughty whipped a large square of pentagram-printed silk from his pocket, spread it with a flourish.

Tsyganov was startled. "What is that?"

"Portable telephone," Doughty said. "Newfangled gadget. . . I always carry one now."

Tsyganov was scandalized. "You brought a telephone into my private quarters?"

"Damn," Doughty said with genuine contrition. "Forgive me, Ivan. I truly forgot that I had this thing with me. Look, I won't take the call here. I'll leave." He opened the door, descended the wooden stair into grass and Swiss sunlight.

Behind him, Tsyganov's hut rose on its monster chicken legs, and stalked away — wobbling, it seemed to Doughty, with a kind of offended dignity. In the hut's retreating window, he glimpsed Tsyganov, peering out half-hidden, unable to restrain his curiosity. Portable telephones. Another technical breakthrough of the inventive West.

Doughty smoothed the ringing silk on the top of an iron lawn table and muttered a Word of power. An image rose sparkling above the woven pentagram — the head and shoulders of his wife.

He knew at once from her look that the news was bad. "Jeane?" he said.

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"It's Tommy," she said.

"What happened?"

"Oh," she said with brittle clarity, "nothing. Nothing you'd see. But the lab tests are in. The exorcists — they say he's tainted."

The foundation blocks of Doughty's life cracked swiftly and soundlessly apart. "Tainted," he said blankly. "Yes . . . I hear you, dear. . . ."

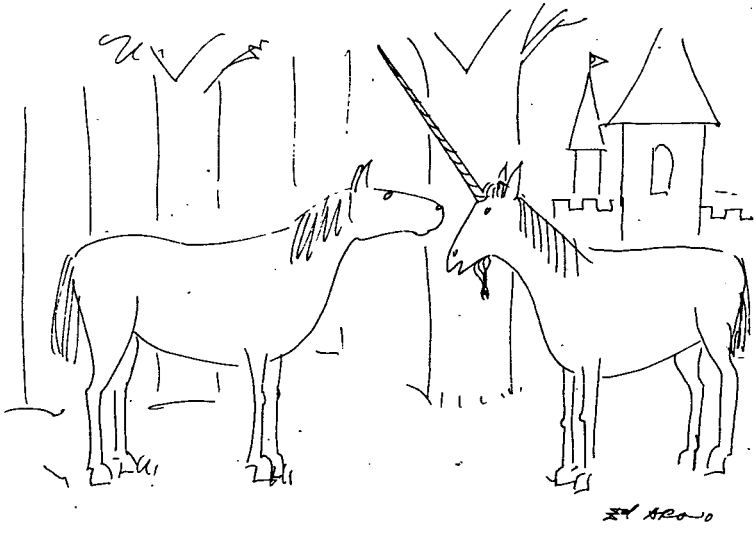
"They came to the house and examined him. They say he's monstrous."

Now anger seized him. "Monstrous. How can they say that? He's only a four-month-old kid! How the hell could they know he's monstrous? What the hell do they really know, anyway? Some crowd of ivory-tower witch doctors. . . ."

His wife was weeping openly now. "You know what they recommended, Elwood? You know what they want us to do?"

"We can't just . . . put him away," Doughty said. "He's our son." He paused, took a breath, looked about him. Smooth lawns, sunlight, trees. The world. The future. A bird flickered past him.

"Let's think about this," he said. "Let's think this through. Just how monstrous is he, exactly?"



"I've tried them all — Bufferin, Exedrin, Tylenol, Advil. Nothing helps."

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Our cover story, "Henry in the Trees," also looks at international relations, although on a much smaller and more personal scale. In addition to his appearances in this magazine, Gregor Hartmann's short fiction has been published in New Dimensions, Galaxy, Aboriginal SF, *and Robert Silverberg's new* Universe *anthology. This story follows a Kentuckian as he takes magic, mayhem, and the art of the feud to modern-day Japan, where things are not as straightforward and no-nonsense as they seem.*

Henry in the Trees

By Gregor Hartmann

Takamatsu
August 23

Dear Grandpa,

I WASN'T COMPLETELY honest with you about why I came to Japan. You and Mom and Dad liked the sound of "broaden my horizons" and "study the old religions," so that's what I played up. The real reason was that I needed to get the h—— out of Kentucky. Our war with the Metcalfs bothers me. I'm nursing a theory that good and evil are similar to positive and negative charges: overall, they must balance. What's good for us is bad for the Metcalfs, and vice versa. Locally our magic might appear to change the balance, but I bet the big picture is, we're just moving energy around. Pardon my confusion — this theory is a mix of physics and Taoism and

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sleepless nights — but it's seized me by the neck and won't let go till I work it out. You see the implications. Do good here; cause evil there. Even scarier, it implies that doing evil here would result in good somewhere else, and you see what a can of worms that opens up. I'm uncomfortable with this line of thought, since the logical conclusion would be that action is futile, and we'd sit around paralyzed and passive. Anyway, while I'm working it out, I vowed not to use the craft. Leaving home was one way to remove temptation. Back there I was Henry Dove, grandson of Hannibal Dove, one of those strange Doves who could talk to trees and all that. Every day someone asked me for a favor. Here, all they see is an English teacher. They come to me for grammar, not charms to repel spooklights. I'm a new man!

Alas, you get the last laugh, because the old Henry Dove is up to his ears in witch trouble. Listen to what happened and give me your sage advice, because I need it bad. (And don't let my folks know, OK? I don't want them to worry.)

I had several job offers from English schools. I chose the one in Takamatsu because it was farthest from Tokyo and the big cities. Takamatsu (which means Tall Pines!) is on Shikoku, the most traditional of the four big islands. People tell me this is what Japan was like fifty years ago. The trees are great. Lots of character. The first night here, I walked for hours, introducing myself to pines and oaks and maples. Japanese have beautiful gardens. The only thing I can't stand is bonsai. To make trees grow small, they starve them and clip off most of their branches and bind them with wire. Trees in bondage. Every time I see one, I want to take it out in the woods and set it free. I may have to found a "Bonsai Liberation Front."

The trouble started in my Thursday night advanced class. I was nervous about teaching adults. Me a kid barely out of college, them twenty years older and wiser — you get the picture. I walked into class the first night, and — boom! A beautiful older woman pounced on me. Noriko Kusahara. Japanese usually bow, but she grabbed my hand in both of hers and squeezed. As I stood there in a hormone haze, her perfume clawing its way down my throat, she looked me over like a butcher about to trim a pork chop and said, "You're not a missionary, are you?"

"Excuse me?"

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"Our last teacher was a missionary. He wanted to teach us about Je-sus. he said we were pagans."

"Well, technically I suppose Buddhism and Shinto qualify as 'pagan.' That's O.K. with me. I'm not a fan of Sky Chief and the Carpenter."

Apparently this passed muster, because Mrs. Kusahara dragged me around to meet the others. She was small and dainty, like a little doll, but with her hand on my arm, I felt like a big, dumb tanker being prodded around by a spry little tug.

One other student caught my eye. Unlike the other housewives, she wore jeans and a white Snoopy sweatshirt. Her hair was pulled straight back and fastened with a blue ceramic clip. The overall effect was college student. Haruko Mori was plain but merry. She bowed. "I hope you'll teach us many fine idioms. My goal is to learn ten idioms every week."

"Good for you. How's it going this week?"

"My shop has been very busy. We're doing a land-office business."

"Bravo!" I applauded. She smiled and blushed. Mrs. Kusahara rolled her eyes. As it turned out, she and Mrs. Mori were the best students in the class. Mrs. Mori's hobby was reading English dictionaries. For practice, she was keeping a diary in English; she asked me to read it and correct her mistakes, so I got an eyeful of her cherished idioms. Mrs. Kusahara was obsessed with rules. Everything out of her elegant red mouth had to be as perfect as her clothes, so she spoke as if she were biting the words, struggling to control them.

My worst student was the only man in the class, Mr. Ishikawa. He managed a hotel and wanted to learn "Een-guu-reesh" so he could talk to foreign visitors. Or so he said. He was always hitting on the housewives, and he never did his homework, so I assume he had ulterior motives. Still, he was always friendly to me. He was the one who took me aside and helped me with my Japanese manners. Like the danger of receiving favors. Supose you go drinking, and the other guy fills your glass. This puts you in his debt, so you better grab the bottle and refill his glass right away to cancel the obligation. Ishikawa said that "receive a favor" and "suffer the damage" are written with the same character in Japanese. This made me uneasy, because my students were always taking me to temples, treating me to sushi parties, et cetera. What kind of tab was I running up? Ishikawa said not to worry, but I sensed he was keeping score.

About two months ago, the school announced a speech contest. I

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assumed Mrs. Mori would enter, since she was so fluent, but she declined. Finally I coaxed her into it. "I give it the old college try," she said.

After class, Mr. Ishikawa bet me one thousand yen (about eight dollars) she wouldn't go through with it. "How come?" I asked.

"She afraid," he winked. "Afraid large group. Happen before."

"Two thousand yen says you're wrong. She'll cream 'em," I said.

But on the day of the contest, she was sick and didn't come. Mrs. Kusahara won a tacky plastic trophy with a globe on top. Yours truly looked good, since the winner was my student, but oh, did I hate having to pay that smirking jerk.

The week after the contest, Mrs. Mori was back in class. "I had terrible pains in my stomach," she said. "I was sick as a dog. I went to the hospital, but the doctors could find nothing wrong." Everyone commiserated with her and berated the stupid doctors. That night we were reading a *Time* essay. The word "psychosomatic" came up, and I explained it, and everyone very carefully did not look at Mrs. Mori. Ishikawa winked at me, the swine.

Later, though, I had second thoughts. Sudden pains that flare up and disappear — odd, in a woman so fundamentally healthy. Did I mention she was into health foods? To avoid chemicals, she even made her own tooth paste (from salt and roasted eggplant!) I went over her diary again, scrutinizing the past six months. The pains had hit twice — in both cases, just before English contests. I didn't buy the psychosomatic explanation. It smelled like a hex to me. Since the pains had started six months earlier, when she joined the class, it had to be one of the other four students. Someone jealous of her English ability.

A depressing revelation. Up till then, you see, I'd been on sabbatical from the craft. (Pun intended.) It was great. No rituals to worry about, no political decisions to agonize over.... On a practical level, being in Japan and away from the Metcalfs meant I didn't have to look over my shoulder every time I visited my friends in the woods. On a philosophical level, I was doing good work. Thinking Big Thoughts. Also, I was practicing zen: sitting and meditating every other night. I felt as if my entire life were slowing down. (Not having a car helped, too.) Peace! One night I sat and pretended I was a walnut tree. No harm to anyone. Just minding my own business, producing oxygen and good things to eat. Grandpa, I was well along the road to arboreal sainthood.

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Now this. I looked down at Mrs. Mori's diary. Her beautiful blue script reminded me of a lake. If I waded in and tried to help her, every move would generate a wave, and each wave would make another wave, and fill the world with thrashing. Action. Violence.

Still, I couldn't let her suffer.

Rather than commit myself, I decided to do some research first. As you can imagine, I was at a huge disadvantage here. I'd been studying my tail off, ever since I decided to go to Japan, but my Japanese was still fairly rudimentary, so I couldn't just trot over to the local shrine and quiz the priests about curses. Takamatsu had one bookstore that carried English books, but Robert Ludlum and Agatha Christie had little to say on Japanese magic. What was left? The class. For our next session, I chose a *Newsweek* article on the "witchcraft boom" in California. You know the type of article — lies and sensational smears — but I figured it would get us talking. Thursday night when I handed out copies, it was hard to preserve my detachment; I felt like a dealer with a deck full of wild cards.

The article intrigued them. "American believe this?" Ishikawa asked. "America is science nation."

"America's a big country. Lots of religions. How about Japan? Do people here do this sort of thing?"

"Of course," he said, matter-of-fact.

"Isn't Japan a modern nation? Computers and biotech?"

"We have tradition, too," he smirked. "Longer history."

"Give me some examples."

"There is *amagoi* — praying for rain. Are lucky, unlucky days. And *waraningyo*."

"What's that?"

They argued among themselves in fast, complicated Japanese. "Come on, people," I chided. "This is an English class."

Mrs. Mori explained. "*Waraningyo* is a straw doll. If you have an enemy, you make a *waraningyo* and write the enemy's name and birth date on it. Then you attach it to a tree. Three nails. It causes terrible pain until the nails are removed. It is fiendish and blackhearted deed."

Her voice was light and breezy, a modern woman telling of a quaint custom. I looked at the others, who seemed equally amused. No concern. No guilty looks. I asked, "Have any of you had an experience with *waraningyo*? Do you know of anyone who's actually seen one?"

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Noes all around. Except for Ishikawa, who described a woman tormented by a *waraningyo* designed to make her want to sleep with lots of men. Turned out it was the plot of a porno movie he'd seen. Remember that hotel he operated? It was a "love hotel." Couples went there and paid by the hour. I tell you this so you can appreciate what a fine, upright, traditional Japanese gentleman Mr. Ishikawa was. The ladies pursed their lips and rolled their eyes. They treated Ishikawa like a bear in the zoo. From a safe distance —behind a moat, say — they observed him and felt superior to his humanoid antics.

By the time we'd read and discussed the article, I knew Japanese words for everything you and I did back in Fayette County. (Many parallels. Some things are universal!) I was convinced that someone could have made a *waraningyo* with Mrs. Mori's name on it. But who? Somehow I couldn't visualize any of those polite, conservative housewives hammering nails into Mrs. Mori's stomach. Ishikawa, though, had two motives: jealousy of her English, and desire to sleep with her. I'd seen her deflect his passes in class; I could imagine him resorting to the craft. He'd probably be turned on by sliding nails into her body. Come to think of it, maybe he was doing sex magic and botching it.

I meditated on the problem that night after class, pleased to find I was so calm I could contemplate this nasty situation with equanimity. A petty mammalian struggle — what did it matter to Saint Henry of the Trees, whose thoughts were as wide and impartial as the wind? Since I was so serene, I decided it was safe to pursue my investigation to the enemy's den.

The next night, I dropped by his hotel, the "Tokugawa" (River of Virtue). I found Ishikawa wearing a blue nautical uniform and a white captain's hat. He was proud that I'd come to visit his business, so he gave me a tour. Each room was named after a famous river. Each room had a concrete floor — a shallow pool — in which floated a bed shaped like a boat. (And you thought Disney World was Dada!) As we visited various rivers, I scoped him out, and reluctantly concluded he was no witch: his spirit was wadded up in flesh. We ended up in the Nile Room, aboard a giant bed that resembled a Pharaoh's barge, where we shared a beer and gossiped about the class.

"Mori," he sighed. "I want to boat her, but she has eyes only for you."

"You're nuts," I said.

"Is true! Don't deny. I know she give you love letter."

"It's just a diary. So I can correct her English."

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"Does she erotic dream?"

"You're a beast. A sex monster."

"Thank you," he giggled. "For young man, you have taste in woman. Kusahara is more pretty but mean. She spiteful shrew. Watch out for her. She killed her husband."

"What do you mean?"

"She marry him for his money. Then he die. Pah!" he made a gesture with his hand, like a head blowing up. "She want to marry again, but she too hard. Everyone in Takamatsu afraid her. She has to go to Okayama to get lay."

In our next class, I looked at Mrs. Kusahara in a new light. You know those women we see at malls? Perfect makeup, perfect clothes: the ones we call "Untouchables." Beauty so formidable you're afraid to get too close. Maybe that's why her flirting left me cold. That evening, Kusahara's mechanical pencil ran out of lead, and Mori lent her a spare. Both women were polite. Grandpa, you haven't seen polite until you've seen two Japanese women being polite to each other. It's a ritual with trilly voices and stylized gestures to conceal the fact they're fixing each other's makeup with bowie knives.

Meditating that night, it was harder to be calm. I'd been sure it was Ishikawa; the advent of Mori rattled me. If he was a jolly, clumsy bear, she was an ax. Sharp, polished, dangerous. . . . Several days passed before Saint Henry was calm and detached enough to make a foray into Kusahara country.

She was pretty well off: a two-story brick house with a little landscaped lawn all around it. I know that doesn't sound like much to you, but in Japanese terms, that's a mansion. She was surprised to see Sensei, but led me to the parlor and served green barley tea. The house was like her: too tidy, too precise. The scrolls on the wall, the samurai dolls — everything glassy and sterile as a tired museum. I asked for a tour, so I could see what was on the second floor, but she said the maid hadn't been in yet. Before I could think of a subtle way to turn the conversation to *waraningyo*, she scooted next to me and put her hand on my thigh.

"What a lucky coincidence you stopped by today," she said. "I've been thinking about taking private lessons. Will you teach me?"

"Don't you like my class?"

"You're a fine teacher. The time isn't convenient. I want to study in the afternoon."

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It was time for this Kentucky witch to take some affirmative action.

"It's against the rules. The school would fire me if I diverted students to private lessons."

"They'll never know. Please, Sensei?" She stroked my leg.

The rules didn't concern me as much as the purr in her voice, the way she said "private" and "afternoon." I had a flash of me lying on the floor, Kusahara coiled around my body like a python. Brrr. Something must have shown on my face, because her seductive smile froze, and the mask snapped back into place. Five minutes later I was on the street, the door behind me vibrating like a steel trap that had just snapped shut.

I was nervous about our next class, but she behaved normally. We called each other "Sensei" and "Mrs. Kusahara" as before. I thought I was off the hook until later, when I saw her talking to one of the clerks. After she left, I asked the clerk what Mrs. Kusahara wanted. He pretended not to know what I was talking about. Finally I wheedled it out of him. In order to plan a surprise party for the wonderful Sensei, Mrs. Kusahara wanted to know my birthday. Of course the idiot told her.

What a nice surprise!

So, Grandpa, I figured I was going to be on the south end of some heavy Japanese magic. It might be love magic, or it might be a curse. Either way, it was time for this Kentucky witch to take some affirmative action.

I hadn't brought my tools with me. Avoid temptation, right? A new country, a new life. All I had was one amulet. The one you carved on a cow bone: the face of an old man with a beard and long hair. Daniel, I called him, since he looked like what I imagine Daniel Boone would look like after a few centuries up in the hills. Having Daniel meant I had you and Kentucky with me. I put him in my pack and headed for the hills myself.

My apartment was on the edge of town. I climbed through the terraces of tame orange trees, and in five minutes I was in the forest. After an hour or so, I found a suitably remote grove, where I built a bamboo man six feet tall and dressed it in the clothes I was wearing. These weren't just any clothes; these were my oldest jeans, my favorite shirt — items soaked in the spirit of Henry Dove. I wrote my name and birthday on the flyleaf of my English-Japanese dictionary and put it in the heart pocket. I cut some hari for the head, put nail clippings in the hands — I tell you, I did a job,

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Grandpa! I walked around bare-bottomed for a while, as if I'd just been born, then put Daniel on and dressed in brand-new clothes. In my mind, I was Daniel, which seemed distinctly safer than being me. You may find this decoy business rather cowardly, but I felt it was a philosophical masterstroke. I was taking action, admittedly, but it was action that would divert a bad action and make it harmless. Instead of stirring up waves, I would cancel them and restore harmony.

In our next class, I caught Mrs. Kusahara staring at me. She seemed puzzled, as if she were a master chef and I a cake that had failed to rise. Afterward I saw her quizzing the clerk, making sure she had the correct date. So I was on the right track. It gave me a chill. Kusahara is tiny and delicate and dresses like a *Vogue* model. I'm not used to being scared by fashion dollies.

After class I read the latest installment in Mrs. Mori's diary. The mysterious pains had returned. She felt as if someone were sticking knitting needles in her liver. "My doctor is bamboozled," she wrote. "He wants to send me to a specialist in Kobe. He says my life hangs by a thread." I slammed the diary shut. Enough!

Right away I took a taxi to Ishikawa's hotel. The lobby was crowded with members of a farmers' cooperative that had come to town. Some of the old guys were leery of the boat-beds; Ishikawa explained that the rocking motion would amplify their sexual pleasure tenfold. Scientists at Osaka University had proved it. Winking, he described the research, and suggested areas where more study was needed. Finally he got them checked in. "Sensei, when you bring girlfriend here? I give you Amazon Room. Special rate."

"Maybe soon," I said. "There's someone I'm interested in. But I need to find out her birthdate."

"Who cares how old is she? Woman is woman." He rolled his eyes and smacked his lips.

"I need to know."

"Where she live — you know?"

Sure."

"Go to ward office in her neighborhood. City official keep record — all family. Her family register tell you what you want to know exactly."

"I owe you one, Captain."

"Yes," he grinned.

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The ward office opened at 9:00 the next morning. By 9:10 I knew that Mrs. Kusahara was born on the third day of the seventh month of Shōwa 19 (1946, in our terms). I stared at the numbers and characters until they were engraved in my brain. The symbol for "month" is a crescent moon. Crescent as in one life waxing, another waning.

Mrs. Kusahara didn't come to class that Thursday. Neither did Mrs. Mori. I called up Mrs. Mori afterward, and she answered with a voice like old smoke. Awful pains, she moaned. Terrible pains. I offered to go to her home and tutor her, so she could keep up with the class, but she declined. She couldn't accept such a special favor, since she was a mere student, and I the teacher who'd already given her so many fine idioms. That she could be so considerate despite her agony drove me wild. Without putting down the receiver, I called Mrs. Kusahara. "Lay off Mori," I ordered her.

"What are you talking about, Sensei?"

"You know what I mean. The *waraningyo* you have nailed to a post on your second floor. Stop it right now."

"You're a modern man. You can't believe all those stupid superstitions."

"Does the date July 3, 1946, mean anything to you?"

She was silent for a moment. "Why did you learn that?"

"Why did you learn mine?"

She laughed. "Sensei, you're full of exciting surprises. The missionary we had before was a tedious little coward. He thought he could convert me. Me! Come over here, and we'll discuss many interesting matters."

"No. Stop picking on Mori. I demand it."

"It'll end soon enough," she purred. "Then you and I can have lessons, and I'll teach you."

Hand shaking, I slammed the phone down.

I stomped around the apartment, angry and scared. I tried to meditate, but I couldn't sit still, so I plunged out into the night and walked for hours, barely conscious of where I was, arguing with myself about what I should do. See, I had the idea that the universe was testing me. Trying to lure me into action, like the devils tempting Buddha. I know that sounds arrogant — since when does the big universe give a damn about little Henry Dove? — but I was truly torn, Grandpa. Every instinct said act! Pick up a magic weapon and attack! But my new philosophy held me back. Who was I to play God? To start another cycle of righteousness and revenge? I must have walked for miles, stewing, thoughts swirling like a

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gray typhoon.

I came out of my trance on my own street, staring at a neighbor's garden. Sitting on a bench beside the house was a shallow blue bowl with a tiny bonsai pine. I looked at that pitiful tree, and something snapped. The gate was unlocked, so I tiptoed in, picked up the bowl, and carried it away. I took it home and put it on my balcony and carefully removed all the wire. Grandpa, that bastard had wrapped twenty feet of wire around that little tree. I flooded her bowl with water and stroked her branches and went to bed.

The next afternoon I called in sick. The secretary who took my call was concered. "You aren't having stomach pains, are you?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"Our last foreign teacher got sick and had to go home. I hope that doesn't happen to you. Be careful what you eat! Our pickles are very strong."

"Pickles. Right."

"By the way. You had a message from Mrs. Kusahara."

"What did she want?"

"She said she can't come to class tonight. She's going to stay home and plan your birthday party. Isn't that strange? She knows your birthday isn't until November."

I jammed what I needed into a backpack and headed for the hills. I hadn't been back to the grove for several weeks, so I was curious to see what had become of my decoy. Wearing my Daniel amulet, thinking my Daniel thoughts, I crept up on the grove. From a distance of about forty feet, I peeped around a big oak. The decoy was down. Poles shattered, clothes wadded up. It looked as if giant hands had twisted a rag to squeeze all the juice out of it. Something swooshed overhead, and I hit the dirt. It was only a bird, but I crawled away, thinking "Daniel Daniel Daniel" as if my life depended on it.

I scrambled to the top of the hill, then headed along the ridge. Pretty soon I was sweating. Not much undergrowth, but I had to climb over the pines and cedars the typhoons had knocked down. Thin soil — not much depth for roots to dig into. The white granite surfaced here and there, and the dark soil covered it like organic snow. I might have been Little Eliza, fleeing through a negative landscape.

Toward evening I came to a big cedar with red bark and a distinguished

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bearing. It reminded me of a sycamore I knew in Kentucky, so I introduced myself and asked if I could sit under it. Sure, the tree rustled. I poured some water on the ground and settled in against the trunk and explained what was happening in Takamatsu. The tree indicated it would be glad to help.

Before I left Takamatsu, I'd bought a bunch of straw from a mat maker. I rolled some into a bundle about a foot long, and tied it with string. Then I made a second bundle, slightly shorter. I tied the two together, like a cross, and split the vertical one at the bottom to make legs. My favorite part of the craft: using my hands. Making tools. I don't know why I wasted my time theorizing. I'm a hands-on witch. Always was, always will be. I love the craft in craft.

I took out my ink and brush, and suddenly it fell so quiet I looked around to see what was wrong. The wind had stopped moving in the treetops, and a nervous calm lay over the island. Warily, I spread out a strip of paper (from one of Kusahara's essays) and dipped my brush into the ink. Thinking about Kusahara, imagining her powdery face, her expensive clothes, her long red talons, I wrote her name and birth date in Japanese characters. I did it carefully, precisely, the ink as black and shiny as anthracite. Waiting for it to dry, I looked around, half-expecting her to pop out of the woods and zap me. The light was starting to go, and the trees were closing in. Fortunately, I'd brought a flashlight.

When the ink was dry, I threaded the strip of paper through the doll's chest. I wove it in and out of the straw, so it was locked in tight. When I finished the little figure was wearing a banner like a contestant in a beauty pageant.

I stood and faced the tree and bowed. "So sorry to trouble you, but I need your help," I said.

The branches stirred. Go ahead.

In my pack I had three big nails. Nails seven inches long. Nails you could put up a barn with. I held one in my hand, savoring its weight, its significance. Up until now, everything I'd done had been passive. Research, negotiation — why, I was as neutral as the Red Cross. When I spiked the *waraningyo*, however, I'd be declaring war on Mrs. Kusahara. Holding that nail reminded me of an incident in the first grade, when I found out what would happen if I poked a knife into an electrical socket.

I almost chickened out. My life was so peaceful now. Then I remembered

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Mrs. Mori, writhing in bed, wondering why her guts were killing her.

I held the *waraningyo* against the tree with my left hand and slipped the first nail into its head. I pulled the hammer from my belt and hit the nail so hard it sank in several inches. Again. Pock. Pock. Pock. Greenness muffled the sound. The second nail went into the chest, sliding through the straw with a snaky rustle. The third into the stomach. Give the bitch a taste of her own medicine.

Just like that, I did it. Fast and hard. Yeah! I have to confess, I enjoyed it, Grandpa. You were pretty severe about me not doing curses till I was older, but I figured I'd shown you. Action! Deeds, not words! I planned to let her suffer for a few hours, then negotiate a truce. While I was waiting, I imagined a philosophical conversation with her. You see, Mrs. Kusahara, your bad deed attracted a good deed to neutralize it. Everything must balance. I hope you learned your lesson. No more hexing the other students. We can keep this matter confidential, of course . . . .

I was standing in the gloom thinking my victory thoughts, when the *waraningyo* twitched. I was so startled I dropped the hammer and jumped back. Then I forced myself to step closer. The arms went up and down, in slow motion, and the legs trembled, as it silently struggled to get loose. I crept up and tapped the nails to make sure they were set. Boy, was she mad! I'd thought about using the ink to paint eyes; now I was glad I hadn't. "Lay off Mori," I said. The doll stopped moving for a moment, then strained again. I gathered up my equipment and put it back in the pack, in case I had to run. Then I sat down at a safe(?) distance to watch.

Thinking: She was twenty years older than I. She'd been a witch almost as long as I'd been alive. How much had she learned? How strong was she?

The light went down in the west, and the *waraningyo* became a pale cross against the darker bark. I moved in close and aimed the flashlight at that little devil. Good thing I did. The nail in her stomach was coming out.

I blinked and rubbed my eyes. No mistake. The nail was turning counterclockwise, like a screw, and slowly coming out.

Strong, I decided. Quite strong. Biting my lip, I tapped the nail back in with the hammer. The *waraningyo* struggled to break free, its straw twitching like an insect's.

For a moment, it was still, as if concentrating. Then the nail in the head started to come out. With a sinking feeling, I pounded it back in.

Boy, I wish you had been there to help. My first hex, a pretty damn

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good one, and she was shrugging it off. If she got free — I didn't want to think about that. I kept seeing the decoy Henry Dove knotted up like a piece of rope, and I held that hammer so tightly my hand ached.

No — it wasn't my grip. I tapped the belly nail, and a twinge of pain jetted through my knuckles. She was fighting back. Sending some force through the *waraningyo*. Turning my own energy against me?

Swell. I tapped the middle nail — and my entire hand ached. Not good, Henry. I waited until the nail was almost out, then bashed it once, hard, and my arm nearly fell off. It hurt so bad I dropped the flashlight and the bulb broke.

By now, it was only an hour after sunset. Clearly, before the night was through, she'd be off that tree. She'd wiggle out from under my attack and be free to counterattack with all her power.

Remember that game at the state fair? The one where plastic moles stuck their heads out of holes, and you had to bop them with a mallet? That's what I was playing; only this game was going to continue until the moles swarmed out and bit me to death. Without a flashlight the only way to know which nail was wiggling loose was to tap each one until it hurt me. Fortunately, she could push only one nail at a time. But she seemed to be getting better at it. They extruded faster, with shorter pauses between nails. And each time I used the hammer, it hurt me worse. I switched to the left arm, then alternated, which obviously wouldn't work for long. Both shoulders were on fire. I could feel each bone in my arms, and muscles down along my chest. The handle of the hammer was sticky with blood from my fingers. I had this stupid flash of me as an armless beggar. I say stupid because at the rate things were going, I'd be lucky to get out of those woods armless.

When lights appeared in the woods, I thought of fireflies. It was summer, after all. But these lights were too big and diffuse. Three large greenish patches of mist, drifting in midair, slowly approaching.

My hair stood up, but I stayed where I was, nailing that damn doll to the tree. The lights moved without a sound, gathering like luminescent wolves of the air.

The three lights clustered, merged, brightened. One big light came at me, bright as a green moon, and I ducked away. It approached the tree, just as the nail in her heart extended. I was scared, but at least I could see now.

"Excuse me," I said, and hammered. When metal touched metal, agony

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splashed over my arm. Screaming, I dropped the hammer and went to my knees in the dirt. When I looked up, dozens of glowing things hovered in the grove, like creatures from the deep ocean, observing me like cold, inhuman eyes. All at once, as if a decision had been reached, they began to cluster. Then the clusters combined, to form one massive, swirling ball of light four feet across. The patterns on its surface reminded me of ocean currents, only faster. It illuminated the clearing like a small green sun, with light so bright that bushes and trees cast horizontal shadows: black shadows radiating out into the forest, like beams of night.

Slowly, it approached me, its shadow rays as solid as rolling logs.

"Stay back," I whispered. The thing came closer.

I'd seen spooklights in the Blue Ridge Mountains, but never so close. Maybe ours are shier? Randy Ferguson swears they're people's spirits, but I don't believe it. I think they're something older. Prehuman. Elemental. I'd never heard of anyone being able to control them. If they weren't Mrs. Kusahara's allies come to free her, what were they?

Scared out of my wits, I crawled out of the way and let them at the tree.

The swarm of light touched the *waraningyo* gently, almost tenderly, like an elephant nuzzling its trainer. This time the nail didn't slide. It popped out. The light recoiled a foot or so as it caught the nail.

I braced myself for the other nails to go, for the *waraningyo* to break free. No point in running. Might as well stand my ground. In the woods, it could come at me from anywhere. Here at least I'd know where it was, and see it coming in the aura of the spooklight. My arms were dead meat, but maybe I could kick it apart. I crouched down, ready to give it a fight. Kamikaze mood: if I had to die, take it with me.

The ball of light approached the tree again. Suddenly a glowing red spike thrust from its surface, like the stinger of a giant bee. It touched the *waraningyo*, and the doll thrashed. A wisp of smoke rose from the dry straw. The spike was the nail — heated red-hot. The spooklight pressed against the tree, driving the nail in, pinning the *waraningyo* with hot red iron. In my mind I could hear it screaming as the smoke curled. The light floated back, just in time for me to see the doll burst into flames and burn with yellow light. For a minute or so, the straw monster flamed and twisted. Finally it came apart and dropped to the foot of the cedar, its pieces writhing and curling. The flames flickered out. The spooklights hovered until the fire died, then broke up like a bubble disappearing. All

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at once the clearing was dark.

I stumbled up to the cedar to make sure it wasn't going to catch fire. The *waraningyō* was a pile of sullen ashes with little orange eyes crackling shut. Groping around in the dark, I found the hammer and painfully pried the three nails from the tree. The middle one was still hot. I apologized to the cedar for all the trouble and gave it a big drink of water. Then I retreated to the other side of the clearing to wait for dawn.

The next morning I headed back to town. At the first phone I came to, I called Mrs. Mori at home. When she answered in her normal happy voice, my heart leaped.

"You sound wonderful!" I said.

"Thank you, Sensei. I'm sorry I missed your class last night. I was playing hooky. I promise to make it up."

"That's all right. I missed it, too."

"We're you sick?"

"No. Kind of. Well, it's a long story. How do you feel?"

"Fit as a fiddle. Last night, before you can say Jack Robertson, the pain stopped. My doctor was buffalo. He said it was a miracle."

"Doctors don't know everything," I laughed.

Her voice became serious. "Did you hear about poor Mrs. Kusahara?"

"What happened?"

"She died last night. There was a conflagration at her house. The police said she must have been smoking in bed."

I said what I was supposed to—how terrible, what a shock, et cetera—and after I hung up, I was surprised to realize that I did feel bad. I hadn't meant to kill her. I had just wanted to slap her wrist, make her quit bothering my friend. I hadn't expected it to come to this. I closed my eyes and slumped inside the phone booth, until a man in a business suit banged on the door. "Sorry," I muttered, coming to my senses. He said something nasty about foreigners. I retaliated by putting a coin in the phone. When he realized I'd paid for his call, thereby doing him a favor, he followed me down the street, trying to shove a coin into my pocket, but I outran him, leaving him in my debt. Ha!

So that's how I got into trouble, Grandpa. Despite my resolution to remain neutral, I'm back in the world again. I acted, and the waves are spreading. Not just as the death of Mrs. Kusahara. Last week, when I went out on the balcony to water my pine, I saw eerie green lights hovering over

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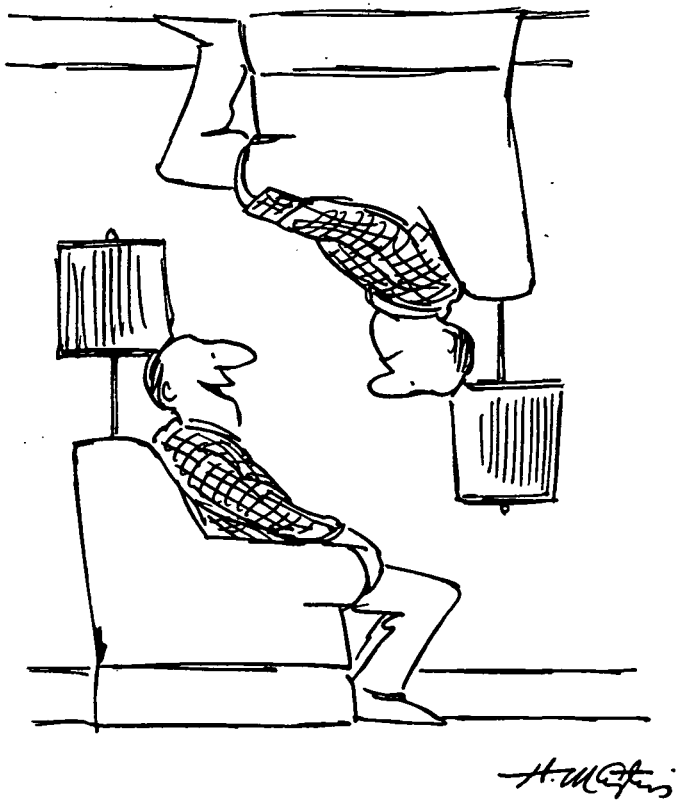
the next building. I thought it was a coincidence, but they were out there last night, too.

They did me a favor, you see, and I have to pay them back.

Any ideas?

Your not-so-prodigal grandson,
Henry



"How's everything going in the twilight zone?"

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SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

THE MARCH OF THE AMINO ACIDS

ONE OF my peculiarities (one which I believe I share with many men) is an affection for the possessions that have grown old — the older the better.

Women do not share this decent reverence for age. When they buy new clothes, they wear them on their way home. With me, it is just the opposite. Every once in a while, my dear wife Janet calls in our tailor, who takes precise measurements of me and manufactures suits, jackets, pants, and other articles of wear of high quality and enormous price.

There then follows everything but a fistfight as Janet tries to get me to wear my new clothes. When she isn't looking, I put on my good old decrepit articles of wear. After all, I'm accustomed to them.

It works with everything. The other day (it happened to be my 17th wedding anniversary, through sheer coincidence) I stopped off at the bank to clip some coupons I had long neglected. For this I had to hand over the key to my safe-deposit box, a key that was attached to a venerable key-case that was dear to my heart. I wouldn't say it was more than thirty years old.

I handed over the key, attached to the key-case, and the woman in charge of the safe-deposit boxes stared at it with a curled lip.

She said, "I should think, Dr. Asimov, that a man with as much money as you have could afford a new key-case."

I jumped a little. After all, do I need this from strangers?

I said, hotly, "I have a new key-case. Several. But this one isn't worn out yet."

"It is too," she said.

"It is not," I said, even more hotly. "Listen, I had a winter overcoat I loved that I had owned for thirty-five vintage years, and my wife went and gave it to the Salvation Army when I wasn't looking

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and I've never gotten over it."

She wouldn't back down. She said, "Your wife was right."

"No, she wasn't," I exclaimed, energetically. "If I didn't love old things, I would get a new wife."

The woman burst out laughing and that ended the conversation, but I was still brooding when I got home. I fixed my dear wife Janet with a baleful eye and said, "A lucky thing for you that I love old things, old thing."

Since this was an odd greeting for a wedding anniversary, she asked what it was all about. I told her what had happened.

She laughed. She thought it was funny.

Women simply don't understand how men feel about things.

I love old essays, too. The first serious science essay I ever wrote for a science fiction magazine was entitled "Hemoglobin and the Universe," and it appeared in the February 1955 issue of *Astounding Science Fiction* — four and a half years before I started the present F & SF series.

It dealt, in part, with amino acid combinations, and in this present essay I'm returning to the subject and hope that I can treat it with the additional skill that 35 years of practice has brought me.

In doing so, I will, in the end, return to the matter of enzymes, the subject I dealt with in last month's essay.

In the early 1800s, chemists were doing their best to determine the chemical structure of various components of foodstuffs, and, in 1827, the British chemist William Prout (1785-1850) first divided those components into three chief classes. The first two of these classes were what we now call carbohydrates (sugars and starches) and lipids (fats and oils). We can dismiss them, for they need not concern us in this essay.

The third chief class was found most conveniently and commonly in egg-white or "albumin" (from the Latin word for "white"), and this class was therefore referred to as the "albuminoids."

In 1838, a Dutch chemist, Gerardus Johannes Mulder (1802-1880), decided that albuminoids were more complex in structure than either carbohydrates or lipids. Whereas the latter two seemed to contain atoms of carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen only, albuminoids contained not only those three elements, but also nitrogen atoms and, occasionally, sulfur atoms. Mulder tried to work out what the actual formula of albuminoids might be but, of course, got nowhere. The complexity of the problem was far beyond the chemical techniques of the day.

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Nevertheless, the possible importance of albuminoids was clear, and, in 1838, the Swedish chemist Jons Jakob Berzelius (1779-1848) suggested that albuminoids be given a new name that would indicate that importance. He suggested "protein" from a Greek word meaning "of primary importance." Albuminoids have been known as proteins ever since.

However, if the overall chemical composition of proteins could not be determined in the early 1800s, it had become possible to break them down and obtain smaller pieces out of it.

As early as 1812, a German-Russian chemist, Gottlieb Sigismund Kirchhoff (1764-1833), had found that if he treated starch with sulfuric acid, he obtained a much smaller molecule out of it. This small molecule was sweet to the taste, so he named it "glucose" from a Greek word for "sweet." Other complex molecules were broken down in this fashion.

In 1820, the French naturalist Henri Braconnot (1781-1855) treated gelatin, an albuminoid substance, with sulfuric acid and obtained two small molecules out of it. One was sweet to the taste, so he named it "glycine." The other could be dried to a white powder, so he called it "leucine" from a Greek word for "white."

It took over a hundred years to obtain all the small molecules of importance. The last of them was "threonine," so-named because it turned out to be structurally related to a simple sugar named "threose." It was discovered in 1935 by the American biochemist William Cumming Rose (1887-1985).

It turns out that there are twenty different small molecules that can be isolated from all, or nearly all, proteins. They are not hugely different in variety, fortunately, or the problem of protein structure might have been too difficult to handle. Rather, they are all members of a particular group of compounds.

All these compounds have a basic skeleton consisting of two carbon atoms and a nitrogen atom (C-C-N). The nitrogen is part of an atomic grouping called an "amine" because it is chemically related to the common substance "ammonia." The carbon atom at the other end of the chain is part of an atomic grouping called a "carboxylic acid," because it contains a carbon atom and two oxygen atoms and has acidic properties. The whole molecule is therefore called an "amino-acid."

Attached to the central carbon atom of the amino acid is a group of atoms called a "side-chain." This varies from amino acid to amino acid. In glycine, the simplest of the

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amino acids, the side-chain consists of a single hydrogen atom. In others, it consists of larger carbon-containing groups. Some of these are electrically neutral; some carry a positive electric charge; some carry a negative electric charge. Every one of the twenty amino-acids has a different side-chain; that is what makes them different amino-acids.

Granted that you can break down a protein molecule into amino acids, how do those amino acids fit together in the intact protein molecule? This problem was solved by the German chemist Emil Hermann Fischer (1852-1919) in 1907.

He was able to show that the amino group of one amino acid combined with the carboxylic acid group of another amino acid. This process was repeated till there was an entire chain of amino acids that had combined in this way. (A water molecule is eliminated at each joining, but we don't have to worry about chemical minutiae.)

The result is what is called a "peptide chain" from the Greek word for "digestion," since in the digestive process, proteins are broken down to such peptide chains to begin with, and to individual amino acids eventually.

Fischer was even able to put together eighteen amino acids into a peptide chain and to show that it could be digested into smaller fragments and eventually, into individual amino acids.

The peptide chain consists of a long chain of carbon and nitrogen atoms that would look like this -C-C*-N-C-C*-N-C-C*-N- and so on, extending considerable lengths in either direction. The asterisk after certain carbon atoms marks those to which a side-chain is attached.

The peptide chain, then, has a series of side-chains of different characters extending outward from the main chain. There are no limitations as to which amino acid can follow which, so there are no limitations to the order of side-chains that exist.

Once a peptide chain is formed, it folds up into a three-dimensional structure, the nature of the folding depending on the order of amino acids in any particular chain. The side-chains may, in some cases, exist inside the folding, but for the most part they are exposed on the surface which thus takes on a characteristic bumpiness, depending on the size, nature and order of the side-chains, and along the bumpiness there are positive and negative electrical charges scattered here and there.

Every different combination of amino acids produces a peptide chain that will, in turn, produce a

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protein molecule with a surface of a distinctive nature. What we have to ask next is how many different surfaces are possible, for each different surface represents a protein molecule of slightly different properties from that of all others.

Since the nature of the surface depends on the order of the amino acids, let us suppose we begin with one each of the twenty different amino acids and ask how many arrangements we can have of those twenty.

The first amino acid can be any one of the 20; the second any one of the remaining 19; the third any one of the remaining 18, and so on. The total number of arrangements, then, is 20 X 19 X 18 X 17 X 16 X 15 X 14 X 13 X 12 X 11 X 10 X 9 X 8 X 7 X 6 X 5 X 4 X 3 X 2 X 1.

You are welcome to work out this product for yourself, but it may be less troublesome to take my word for it. The product is just over 7,280,000,000,000,000,000.

This sounds enormous and it is indeed enormous, even though it only involves one amino acid of each type. A protein molecule may well have a sizable number of each of the amino acids, which greatly increases the total number of arrangements possible. Of course, if you have five of a particular amino acid, each present in a certain position of the chain, it doesn't matter if those amino acids are switched about; whether there is one or another of the five identicals in a particular spot. Five amino acids can be rearranged in 120 different ways, so that the total number of arrangements that would exist if all the amino acids were different has to be divided by 120. This is true for every case in which a particular amino acid is found in the chain more than once, but it is a detail that can be handled without undue difficulty.

Let us suppose, for instance, that a protein molecule consists of a peptide chain that is 240 amino acids long (by no means unusually long for a protein) and that, just to simplify matters, the chain includes 12 each of the 20 amino acids. The total number of possible arrangements, then, is something I won't write out. Instead I will say that it is just about a 4 followed by 458 zeroes; that is 4×10^{458}.

This is enormously larger than the total number of particles in the Universe, and yet it by no means represents the full range of possible variations in protein structure. Protein molecules may be longer and shorter than 240 amino acids; and the numbers of each individual amino acid would vary from protein to protein.

The net result is that while the total number of possible protein

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molecules remains finite in a mathematical sense, it is to all practical purposes infinite.

There may have been tens of millions of different species of living things on Earth during the course of its history, and each species would have to have distinctively different protein molecules. There would be room for that.

Each individual organism may not be quite like any other organism of that species and, therefore, must have somewhat different proteins. There's room for that.

It may be that only one particular protein arrangement out of a billion, or out of a trillion, has any chance of having biological significance. That one out of a billion, or out of a trillion, is still enough for everything on Earth.

In fact, if there are protein-based forms of life on a trillion different worlds, the chance of any of them duplicating what exists on Earth or on any other world is virtually zero. There is room in the protein molecule for everything on every habitable world.

Astounding, isn't it? I've thought about this for nearly forty years and I've never stopped being astounded.

Last month, we discussed enzymes, and the question arose as to what, exactly, the chemical nature of enzymes might be. It is easy to suppose that they are proteins for there are many different enzymes in the human body, and many other enzymes in every species of living thing, all of them possessing distinctive properties. It is quite possible for different species of organisms to have enzymes of slightly different properties even when they perform the same basic functions and, as the enormous range of protein structural possibilities became clear, it was natural to assume that enzymes were proteins.

However, an assumption is not evidence, and what chemists wanted was to purify enzymes — to obtain solutions that showed enzymatic properties, but from which all non-enzyme material had been eliminated. They might then show that the material in solution gave a positive test for protein — or did not.

The person who tackled this problem was a German chemist, Richard Willstätter (1872-1942). He was a real heavyweight and was one of the outstanding chemists of his time. He had done important work on the structures of chlorophyll and other plant pigments and had received the 1915 Nobel Prize in chemistry as a result.

In the early 1920s, he began to work on the structure of enzymes. He worked with an enzyme called "invertase," which split table sugar

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(sucrose) into two simpler components, glucose and fructose. Whereas sucrose twisted the plane of polarized light in one direction, the mixture of glucose and fructose twisted it in the opposite direction. It was from this inversion of the twist that the enzyme got its name.

Willstätter carefully purified the enzyme, getting rid of extraneous materials. At every step he tested each fraction for invertase activity, keeping the particular one that showed activity and purifying it further.

In the end, he had a clear solution that was quite active in splitting sucrose into its components, but that did not yield a positive result for even the most delicate known test for proteins. Furthermore, there was no sign of any amino acids in the solution, either free or in the form of peptide chains.

The conclusion was obvious. Willstätter stated firmly that enzymes were not proteins but had to be small molecules of unknown composition, molecules that had thus far not been studied systematically. No one doubted his conclusion, and the matter seemed to be settled in a negative sense, at least. Chemists thought they knew what enzymes were not.

Yet there was a major flaw in Willstätter's reasoning. Enzymes were, apparently, catalysts, bringing about reactions without themselves being directly involved. It was known that catalysts were sometimes effective in very small concentrations. What, then, if enzymes were particularly efficient as catalysts and did their work in such tiny concentrations that, although they were proteins, there was never enough protein present to react to any of the tests in a visible manner?

Naturally, it was not enough to say that was possible. It had to be proved by hard and fast evidence.

In 1927, Willstätter visited Cornell University to lecture on his notions on enzyme structure. What he didn't realize was that, in the audience, was a biochemist who had already proven him to be wrong.

That biochemist was James Batcheller Sumner (1887-1955). When he was still a teenager, he suffered a hunting accident and had to have his left arm amputated. Since he was left-handed, he had to train himself to use his right hand. With ferocious dedication, he went on to college and graduate school, and finally joined the faculty at Cornell University Medical College.

What Sumner decided was that, in purifying an enzyme, he would not seek to obtain a water-solution that would contain too little enzyme to test for. He would subject his fractions to the kind of chemical procedures that would produce cry-

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stals. If the enzyme, whatever it might be, could be obtained as crystals, some of those crystals could be dissolved in a minimum quantity of water, and the result might be a solution that could yield positive results for protein (or not).

He studied an enzyme called "urease," which split urea into the simpler molecules of ammonia and carbon dioxide. Since jackbeans were particularly rich in urease (or, at least, showed high levels of urease activity), he ground them up and began the process of extraction and fractionation.

In 1926, he obtained small crystals which, when dissolved in water, showed tremendous urease activity and responded positively to tests for protein. Attempts to purify the crystals further could not separate the protein from the activity, and Sumner finally decided that urease was a protein and that, very likely, other enzymes were proteins as well.

Sumner published his paper on the subject, but almost no one paid attention. Willstätter's prestige was enormously higher than that of the unknown Sumner, and it was easy to argue that some small enzyme compound just happened to tie itself tightly to an inert protein carrier.

Others, however, threw themselves into the task of crystallizing enzymes, and the American biochemist John Howard Northrop (1891-1987) crystallized "pepsin" in 1930, "trypsin" in 1932, and "chymotrypsin" in 1935. These were three different digestive enzymes, and Northrop showed that each one was a protein.

The result was that in 1946, Northrop and Sumner won shares in the Nobel Prize in chemistry. The matter was settled. Enzymes have been crystallized in numerous cases and all, with no exceptions, have been proteins. (It is possible that non-proteins may have catalytic properties. This may well be true of ribonucleic acid, for instance, but it is nowhere near as efficient as protein catalysts.)

But how does an enzyme work? Emil Fischer, who was the first to work out the structure of the peptide chain, was also the first to suggest the existence of a lock-and-key mechanism.

A given enzyme has a particular surface structure, and it might well be that a portion of the surface, both in bulk and electric charge, is such that some molecule just happens to fit that surface. Its surface zigs where the enzyme's zags; it has a negative charge where the enzyme has a positive charge; and so on.

Such a well-fitted molecule, if it strikes the enzyme surface through

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the random thermal motions that all molecules undergo, sticks to the surface tightly. Other molecules that don't fit the surface merely strike and bounce off.

The molecule that fits the surface probably doesn't fit exactly. There is a slight strain, a slight stretch imposed on the bonds that connect two of the atoms. The result is that the bond can add on the component atoms of water, let us say, and break apart. This happens far, far more readily than if the molecule were not on the enzyme surface but were just floating around the cellular contents by itself. Thus, sucrose can remain in solution indefinitely without splitting up into a glucose and fructose, but when there is a bit of invertase present, then every time a sucrose molecule fits onto the invertase surface, it breaks in two almost at once.

Once the break takes place, the individual glucose and fructose molecules don't fit the surface as well and they come away. There is then room for another sucrose molecule to strike and so on.

Enzymes can also cause two molecules to combine into a larger one. Small molecule A fits the surface just here, and small molecule B fits the surface very near by. The two are oriented in such a way that a bond can easily form between two atoms, producing a larger molecule that no longer fits quite so well, and leaves the surface.

This view of the matter explains a great deal. Each individual enzyme molecule can bring about thousands, or perhaps even millions, of changes among the small molecules that surround them, and do so in a very short time. This means that a particular enzyme need be present only in traces — which was what Willstätter stumbled over.

Some enzymes only work when a particular metallic atom is incorporated into their structure — copper, zinc, molybdenum, and so on. Such atoms are necessary in the diet, but only in traces. They are therefore called trace minerals. In some cases, rare organic groupings must be present, and these are the vitamins which must therefore exist in the diet.

In reverse, there are substances that interfere with the working of enzymes. In putting the relatively few enzyme molecules in the body out of action, changes of great importance are prevented from taking place, and life may become impossible. That is why some poisons kill quickly in even tiny doses.

You can also see the importance, now, of the infinite complexity of the protein molecule. It is easily possible to find a protein surface that just fits any given molecule.

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For that reason, it is possible for a human being to have a thousand different enzymes, each capable of bringing about a particular chemical reaction with great rapidity.

Since the cells have devices that can activate and inactivate enzymes, different chemical changes can be hastened or slowed and, in a healthy body, all the changes take place smoothly and appropriately.

Naturally, different species have enzymes of slightly different nature that produce changes of different types in different balance so that a giraffe ovum becomes a giraffe and an elephant ovum becomes an elephant and never vice versa.

And we can be sure that extraterrestrial creatures will be nothing at all like any creature of Earth.

There is a certain tendency to make enzymes (and catalysts, generally) into mysterious objects. It seems mystical to say that an enzyme, or any catalyst, can bring about a quick chemical change without itself being changed in the process.

The lock-and-key mechanism should remove all of this mystery and demonstrate the process to be perfectly natural and above-board, but we don't have to stay at the molecular level to explain it. We can give a very precise example of a catalyst and the manner of its working in everyday terms.

Suppose, for instance, you want to write a note. You have only a piece of thin, flimsy paper and a pen and you are standing on a pebbly beach. You can try to write the note while holding the paper in your hand but it will crumple and tear. You can put it down on the pebbles and try to write, but it will crumple and tear even worse. Neither your hand nor the pebbles offer a suitable surface.

If, however, you have a nice, smooth piece of wood, you can place the paper on the wood and write the note neatly and quickly. You can write hundreds of notes if you wish and, in the process, the piece of wood does not change, nor does it participate actively in the writing. It merely offers a convenient surface — and that is what an enzyme, or a catalyst, generally, does.

No mystery.

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Ronald Anthony Cross is a frequent contributor to F&SF. His short fiction has appeared in Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, Amazing Stories, *and* Pulphouse *as well. "Johnny's Inferno" marks the beginning of our look at that strange and exotic place called Death. This is a light-hearted tale with some serious overtones, and a nice twist on a subject that has been done, well, to death . . .*

Johnny's Inferno

By Ronald Anthony Cross

ONE MINUTE YOU'RE having the time of your life. Reveling in the glories of the flesh. Giving pleasure, receiving pleasure; positively religious experience if you ask me. I'm alive, your whole being shouts, I'm the most ever alive.

The next minute and you look up to see her big, ugly, mean, stupid, clumsy, coarse, ill-smelling pig of a husband coming through the door.

"Honey, I'm home."

Honey is still kicking up her heels, as the saying goes. In fact, unless I'm mistaken, we are talking about frantically kicking my back as one goads a racehorse to the finish before . . before . . .

I heard the shot, but could not, or more likely would not, register what it was.

Then pain. Then dizziness. Then only fragments of sensations, sirens, loud, strangely toneless voices, urgent yet businesslike and detached at the

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same time, bits and pieces of medical jargon ("I want a BP; gimme a BP. Damn it, I'm not getting a read here"). Sensations of movement. Then siren again, then dark.

Then light, little white dot. Head for the dot. Then much, much light. Undifferentiated light. You see some things but they don't make sense; you can't really describe or remember them. This goes on and on.

Gradually the experiences become more and more—What is the word here? Recognizable—coherent? Not sane, you understand, not logical, just more like something or other happening. Something you could think of as experience. If you could think at all.

For instance, I remember sitting on a pink cloud arguing with a pink creature that kept changing its head. I was absolutely furious. "You are a pig," I would shout, and its head would change into the head of a pig. Then even more furious (because it was the creature's act of changing that infuriated me), I would shout: "You are a zebra," and its head would change into the head of a zebra. Except that we weren't speaking English, of course, or any other language you have heard. And it wasn't a pig, or a zebra, it was astral creatures, formed by my act of speaking the word which defined my feeling about what they were.

Experiences like that. Many of them.

But sooner or later (ha ha, as if time applies here), you wind up standing in front of the large expanse of plain wooden counter. Everything else is murky at this point, just the counter and the wavery form of the female.

"Name," she says.

"Name ," you say, savoring the word.

"Name," she says.

"Name," you say again, happy to have caught on so easily.

"Corbone," she says. "Johnny the Punk Corbone."

"Your name is Johnny the Punk Corbone?" I say, astonished.

"No, your name is Johnny the Punk Corbone."

It is at this point that her form and the rest of the room begins to clear up. The outline of her wings and halo comes clear, sort of misty wavy, but you can make it out. Or, as in my case, the horns and tail.

"This can't be hell," I said. "Don't tell me this is hell."

"Okay," she said. "What would you like to call it?"

"Hey, I don't belong here," I said. "It's a mistake. You know, some kind of mix-up. That thing at the beach, that was an accident."

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"What thing at the beach?" she said, looking interested.

"No, really, don't I have a right to a trial here? I mean, I'm sure it's just a mix-up of some kind. Can't you double check with, uh . . . with Him?" I rolled my eyes up at the heavens, if that's where they were.

The female demon or whatever she was broke out into a loud clear staccato of laughter. Her face lit up when she laughed, her breasts jiggled, and to my delight one of them popped out of her low-cut red bodice. Peek-a-boo.

"You like?" she said, still smiling her beautiful free smile, but shoe-horning her tit back in.

"Ah, Punky," she said, gradually regaining control. "You kill me, and that ain't easy anymore."

"Couldn't we just consult old Mr. Big in the sky?" I insisted. "Sure, why not?"

"Hey, you forgot what he's like, here? We're talking vengeful, angry, grouchy. Dude loves to show off. And to him, showing off is like: Zap—everyone in the village gets the plague. Hey, did you see that great flood? At the very least he'd drop a fucking boulder on your head so fucking big, the only thing left you'd be good for would be a fucking tent peg. See, I'd hook the rope right around underneath your cute little nose here, Punky, and we could all play camping out in hell for a while." She reached over and tweaked my nose.

"Will you stop calling me Punky? I'm Johnny the Punk. Not Punky the John, all right?"

"Sure, all right with me, Punky. Cool out, dude. This is hell, not heaven. Nobody needs to stand at attention or wear a uniform here. In fact, you don't need to wear anything at all." She snapped her fingers, and sure enough was nude. Joyfully, luxuriously nude. And not just nude, either. Rude nude.

"Boy, hell is fun," she said, smiling her beautiful smile. "You wouldn't want to go to heaven anyway. It's the worst, dude."

"Is the Ayatollah Khomeni there?"

"Sure," she said, "are you putting me on? Of course he's there. Ugly dude's a saint. He's in heaven or Valhalla or paradise or whatever. You know, there's lots of different heavens, dude. Different strokes for different folks."

"Is Ronald Reagan there?"

She wrinkled up her nose and threw up both hands in mock surprise.

"Whoa, thou shalt know thy politics, dude. Ronald Reagan is still alive, or at least as much so as he ever was. That's another bad mark on God's

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scorecard labelled Punky."

"God's political?"

"Of course he's political. For crying out loud. Okay, look, try to visualize it this way and you'll be pretty close. Picture a typical narrowminded middle-American WASP. That's Yahweh."

"But the Bible, the Torah, the — the — Shabbit?" (Was "Shabbit" a word?)

"You can forget that 'Jews are the chosen race' bullshit while you're at it. All a mistake. The only reason God tried to be extra nice to them was he knew a whole bunch of them were going to wind up in the U.S. later on, see? Like you got your New York Jew and you got your Miami Jew. What about L.A.? Lots of Jews in L.A. these days?"

I thought about it, and shook my head. "Not enough," I said.

"Well, what the hell," she said. "Can't win em all, I guess. Where was I? Oh yeah, you're going to love it in hell. None of that phony-baloney shame bullshit. You can be rude, as I have taken pains to demonstrate to you. And there's lots to do here. R&R. Let's see, you can screw, or you can screw, or you can screw. Personally, I prefer screwing." She leaned over the counter toward me, elbows on the surface, lovely face on hands, and pert little nipples just brushing that lucky piece of wood.

"Do you mean," I stammered, "that we get to screw in hell?"

"Hey Punky, pay attention here. Am I coming in loud and clear? We get to do whatever we fucking want, dig? You can swear in church, you can go into a library and scream your lungs out. You can show your bare bottom to a nun (there are a lot of them here), and not only can you screw, but—get this, dude—you don't even have to pretend that it has any relationship to love."

I must have swayed under the impact of that, because I actually stumbled and had to catch my balance by grabbing the counter. She leaned closer; I . . . we kissed.

"Not like that, dude," she said. "Kiss nasty."

"I just can't believe this," I said. "You mean God doesn't care if we screw a perfect stranger?"

"Hey, the more perfect, the better. But sure he cares, only, only — Shit, I can't keep a straight face and tell you this." Her face puffed out like a balloon and then shrank back to normal.

" . . . only the poor dude thinks of it as punishment." She broke into another of her fits of loose loopy laughter.

"For real," she said when she got control of herself. "Hey, you ought to

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see heaven. You simply would not believe it. Everybody all solemn and mopey, and it's 'Yes, oh Lord of Lords, this' and 'Yes, oh glorious King of the fucking heavens that'. Thou shalt not—oh shit, you name it, and thou shalt not do it. And all of the time everyone kissing ass and groveling around him. You know what? He thinks the greatest reward of heaven is to be around him, bask in his glory, like that, and know what? They don't even like him. You dig? He doesn't even pick up on the fact that they don't even like him."

"They don't like God in heaven?"

She shrugged, her breasts danced. "Hey, what's to like? For crying out loud, he's just like them, right? Made in their image or vice versa—whatever, I forget.

"Okay, now," she continued, and obviously was heading for the punch line because she was pointing her finger at me, "you tuning in here, right? But are you ready for this? They . . . they . . . " She was choking from the attempt to resist breaking into an endless fit of laughter — "They play the harp."

"No," I muttered, dumbfounded.

"They play the fucking harp. Every last poor suffering son of a bitch of them. The awful, awful, syrupy, icky, boring, boring harp.

"They have to," she said, before I could ask. "I told you how strict he is. They just go on and on, and you can't escape it anywhere, that awful heavenly puky music.

"Anyway, want to screw?"

"Well," I said. "Well . . . " I hesitated. Could this really be true?

"I can invite a bunch of people in here if you'd rather have an audience. How bout nuns? Did I mention we got a bit of an oversupply on nuns here?"

The sex was so intense, almost unbearable while it lasted. But as soon as you stopped focusing on it it faded away so quickly and so thoroughly that it was difficult to believe it had ever really taken place.

I did not bother to mention before that there were a few shadowy forms in the waiting room; from what I could make out of them they were just sitting there waiting, naturally. They seemed content to watch the act we performed on the high wooden counter. Or perhaps just to sit and wait.

"Listen, can I see you again?" I whined tenderly.

She wrinkled up her nose. "I told you we don't have to go through that here. In other words: Not if I see you first, dude. Consider yourself indoctrinated, fully! Get lost, dude." She pointed to the door which emerged

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from the cloudy indistinct far end of the room.

"But where will I go? What will I do?"

"Do whatever you want and go wherever you want. Just go, okay? Next."

Outside, it looked pretty much like any city . . . Well, a lot like L.A., I must confess. Pretty crowded. Pretty noisy. Except that some of the people were naked. Some were doing really crazy things. Like L.A., I guess.

While I was just standing there trying to figure what to do with myself, sure enough, a nun stalked by in a regulation black habit. An urge struck me, emanating from early days spent being tortured in Catholic school, I suppose.

I fell into step behind her and slapped her briskly on her large black-covered fanny, hard.

She whirled around. "Why did you do that, my son?" she said, making the sign of the cross.

"Because you're a pussybitch and I hate you," I said.

"How interesting," she said, crossing herself again. "You must have been a Catholic at one time. See how you have fallen from his grace." She rolled her eyes up; I guess I had the direction right.

"Will you please stop crossing yourself?" I said. "You're driving me crazy."

"But that's the point," she said, upping the tempo. She was crossing herself so fast I was afraid she would take off. "It is supposeth to drive crazy the wicked, the evil, and the—er—already crazy. It is supposeth to maketh them sleepy. Art thou not sleepy, oh evil one? Indeed I shall maketh you to lie down in green pastures. In cow dung. Anywhere I wanteth you to, in fact."

I was sitting down on the sidewalk now. Blinking, watching fascinated as her hands fluttered and waved in the air. It was like trying to see the wings of a hummingbird. And she was mumbling sonorously in Latin now, or was she making it up?

"Ixnay ouyay with the ayingstay onsciouscay. Eepslay, eepsly igpay."

I could hardly keep my eyes open. In fact, I realized at one point, they weren't open. I had just been pretending to myself that they were open. But so what? They were closed and I was asleep. Why should I care about that? Sweet, sweet sleep. Yet I had the sensation of something being quite wrong. The sensation that I shouldn't be asleep here. Wherever here was. But I was so weary. So eager for oblivion, for the dark.

"Wake up, you little wretch."

My head jerked, my eyes snapped open. Where was I? School? I'd fallen

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asleep in school? I looked around me. Other kids at their little desk prisons staring at me with malicious expressions, eager to see me punished, humiliated, tortured. It was school, all right.

One little boy with a particularly evil expression struck a chord in my memory. Then I had it. It was Billy, he used to be my best friend. "Billy . . . ?" I said.

"Boy, you're really gonna get it this time, pukie," he said joyfully. It was Billy, all right.

"Sister, Sister, I saw it. I saw it. Pukie Corbone was playing with hisself. He was only pretending to be asleep, Sister. He was playing with his winkie."

The big heavy powerful nun seemed to glide across the floor toward me.

"Don't say 'winkie,'" she said. "Say 'stick of doom.'"

"She's gonna see ya, pukie," Billy whispered gleefully.

I looked down. My God, I wasn't wearing any pants.

One of the girls, I recognized her as little Agnes Cleighorn, always the teacher's favorite, stood up and raised her hand.

"Oh Sister, he's making me—he's—I'm going to faint."

"Permission to faint granted," the nun barked without even looking in her direction. "Dear," she added.

Agnes hit the floor. Hard.

"Hold out thy hand."

I held out my hand.

Whack! Hidden ruler flashed out from under her habit in a beautiful execution of the nun's fast draw, and smashed down onto my knuckles. Holy shit!

"If thy hand offends thee, cast it out, saith the Lord. And the hand that touches the stick of doom whall wither into dust and . . . and . . . thy tongue shall bleed the venom of the viper and . . . and . . . What?! Art thou wearing no pants?"

The class burst into joyous laughter. I looked down. "Yes, I am wearing no pants," I said.

"Then putteth thy bare bottom up here atop thy desk where I can get at it."

I climbed up and lay bottom up across my desk, trying frantically to hide my stick of doom from the jeering schoolchildren.

Now the good sister paused dramatically. "We thank thee, oh Lord, for the feast thou hast put before us," she murmured. Eyes closed. Hands

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together in prayer position. The ruler must have been back under her habit in a fast-draw shoulder holster, or whatever she carried it in.

"Now," she shouted. "Oh now, now." And the ruler was out and in her hands and whipping down onto my bare butt again and again.

The pain was so intense, almost unbearable while it lasted. But as soon as you stopped focusing on it, it faded away so quickly and so thoroughly that it was difficult to believe it had ever really taken place.

Whoa . . . Wait a minute. Just what was happening? Something was clearly wrong here, but I couldn't quite pinpoint it.

"Why are you looking at me that way?" the good sister mumbled. "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, but mostly he taketh away, is that what you're thinking? He hath turned his glorious back on me. Is that what you're thinking? Well, I will have you know that he loveth me above all others of his flock. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures." (She yawned. Another nudge at my sluggish memory, but not enough.)

"He would never desert me," she screamed; she was vibrating with rage now. "He is with me every minute, down here with me." (Down here?) "I'm a spy for him, you see? He wanteth me to . . . "

Suddenly the ground shook, thunder rumbled, and a mighty voice shouted, "Thou liest, as usual, Sister Mary Margaret. But thy voice crying out in the wilderness hath been heard. Yea, I hear even the littlest sparrow, which is okay, but your whining voice is one too many. Nevertheless, I do hear thy plea, and my answer is the big N.O."

The schoolroom trembled as laughter rumbled through the heavens louder than any thunder.

"Damn it, damn it, damn it," Sister Mary Margaret appeared to be shouting, although you couldn't hear it. The children were screaming and panicking, although you couldn't hear it.

And quite suddenly I found myself out sitting on the sidewalk in hell.

"Whoa," I said out loud. "That bitch was tough."

"Oh, she's not so bad once you get to know her," a sweet little voice piped in, "she's worse." High-pitched giggle.

A little thingie with horns hovered in the air near my head.

"New here?" it inquired.

"Yes, I think that's it," I muttered, still confused.

"Want to go home?"

"Not really. Actually, I sort of like it here."

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"There's always the sex," it agreed.

"No, I like it all. Do anything you want. It's great. But you have to get used to it."

"You liked getting your ass kicked by that nun?" It looked a bit skeptical.

"I learned a lesson from it," I said. "There's a whole lot of other people around here doing what they want to. You've got to watch your step a little. But at least there's no phony set of rules, right?"

The little creature nodded its head so enthusiastically that its whole body bobbed up and down in the air. And still hovering, it said: "Only one."

"One what?"

"One rule. Don't go through the black spot." It flew away.

"Oh." It zoomed back. "If you want to go home, just close your eyes and make your own."

"Yeah, click your heels three times and say..." But I was talking to empty air.

After a long time, a long, long time of wandering around hell, kind of getting to know the place, and screwing and drinking and carousing and playing a few jokes and having a few jokes played on me, I sort of got tired. Not physically — I didn't need sleep, of course—but I needed to rest. To be alone. At home. I remembered what the creature had said. I closed my eyes and built my home. After a while it manifested around me. I got up and went over and lay down on the couch. But I wondered if there weren't still another of me sitting down out in the street with my eyes closed imagining this. For a while. Then I forgot about it and started exploring the house. I went from room to room. Up and down stairs, up and down more stairs. Into other rooms. The place seemed to be endless.

Finally I came to a huge room where the walls were wavery and indistinct. As if they hadn't quite been formed yet. There was a big black spot in the middle of one of them. What had that funny little creature said? It wouldn't hurt to go in a little ways, would it? It was like entering a closet, or maybe a cave. All dark. A little farther. What was that? I could see something, a patch of light in there, but I couldn't make out what it was. A little closer. Now it was down below me and slightly in front. I moved toward it. Some kind of bed or cot or stretcher or — I was snapped toward it.

Dark. And pain. Terrible pain. The loud howl of an angry siren. A voice saying, "All right, I got some BP here, this guy's alive."

For the next few months I had to watch myself. Keep from jumping in

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front of a truck or maybe doing something really evil just to make sure I didn't get sentenced to heaven later on. But I remembered what that great demon receptionist or whatever she was had said about other heavens, hells, Valhallas, whatever. No need to force it, I figured, I'm probably bad enough, just naturally, but not, I hope, too bad. I'll probably get what I deserve, like the rest of us. So there's no need to push anything. On the other hand, there's not much point in panicking every time there's an earthquake or some crazed Los Angelino aims his car at you. I figure probably the place you'll be going to is a lot like the place you're at. And for your sake, hope it isn't heaven.

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Geoffrey A. Landis's first appearance in this magazine is a stunning short science fiction piece about love that stretches beyond all boundaries. In 1990, Geoff won the Nebula for the best short story. His stories have appeared in Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, Amazing Stories, Analog, Pulphouse, *and* Interzone. *His first book, a short story collection, will hit the stands in November.*

A Long Time Dying

(a love story in twelve cantos)

By Geoffrey A. Landis

1.

THEY NEVER MET, not when they were alive.

2.

DRIVING HIS Porsche too fast for rain-slick roads, he died a few days shy of twenty-two. By then he'd made his million in software. He wasn't racing, wasn't even drunk; just in a hurry to get home, I guess. A station wagon threw a tire and swerved across the road.

He never lost control; couldn't avoid the bridge abutment, though. They lived, the couple in the other car. He died before the ambulance arrived.

3.

GOING SLOWLY nowhere all her life, she was ninety-eight the day she died. Too many years and more of ghetto life. Her grandkids were too busy with their own kids' pregnancies and brats to heed her moans. She's better dead at last now, anyway; better if she'd died off long ago. Her cancer took her slowly. No one cared.

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The coroner preserved the biopsy. Rules, not reasons: no one would want her cells.

4.

HE HAD his body frozen when he died, saved from decay in bubbling nitrogen. Dead is dead, he'd say — but still, they might learn to unfreeze the solid staring dead, repair the flaws, to let him live again. Stranger things than that he'd lived to see, and, being dead, he'd nothing left to lose. He gambled, and he lost — but never knew.

5.

THEIR CELLS forgotten for two hundred years, the odd distinctions blended, blurred to brown, until all people had the same tan skin. We need the old gene samples now, they said; regain the varied heritage we've lost. We need old racial stock: black, freckled white, to clone new children every human hue.

And so it was they both would live anew, remembering nothing of the life they'd known.

6.

THEY FELL in love while mining moons of ice, in orbit far above cold Saturn's storms. He was a miner, she an engineer.

She died when fusion engines glitched and blew on slingshot orbit over Titan's clouds. Tumbling, she burned through methane atmosphere.

He mourned a hundred years. Then he died, too.

7.

ON THE starship he was there — or bits of him, frozen in helium. Her cells were, too. They sped through emptiness, robots the crew, a thousand years.

On a planet of the star Gamma Cepheus, they were born again. (Nobody lived on Earth at all by then; not humans, anyway — just one-celled plants, cockroaches, horseshoe crabs, fungi, and ants.)

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THEY FOUGHT frost-dragons on the southern coast; they tamed the wilds of Asgard in the north, and conquered mile-high peaks of Avalon. When the last explorers died, a whole world mourned. The council decreed that they should live again.

And so a dozen clones of each were born.

9.

CAME THE secession wars, and they both fought on different sides, as gunner and as crew. In hypersonic flight she shot him down ten times.

The eleventh "he" slipped by her guns to drop a bomb no larger than a fist. It left her city a crater nine miles wide.

After retaliation, both sides lost the taste for war and antimatter bombs. She wrote the treaty; he was one who signed.

10.

WORLDS CAME and went, rebirths and deaths and pain. Sometimes she loved him first, or he loved her; sometimes they never met before they died.

They played their game of tag a billion years, through countless stars across the galaxies.

11.

THE STARS grow cold, and slowly fade to rust; black holes devour the embers that are left. He loves her still — or loves her yet again.

Slowly, expansion slows and stops, and turns the microwave background blue-white hot. Stars reignite, and galaxies reform; entropy reverses in chaos of collapse. She says good-bye, a millionth, billionth time — a final time.

The moment just before the end of all things comes, he answers back.

12.

NOTHING LASTS forever, is what he said.

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Dean Whitlock's last story here was "On the Death of Daniel," a strong story about a young man with AIDS. "The Woman, the Pilot, the Raven" is also a story about death, but more than that, it's a story about life. "The Woman, the Pilot, the Raven" is set in the mountains in the eastern United States, bringing us back to that same type of familiar but exotic locale that we began the issue with. Dean uses that location to explore a familiar and exotic place in the soul.

The Woman, the Pilot, the Raven

By Dean Whitlock

I COULD SAY it was Dicey who almost got me killed — God knows she put me on the edge often enough — but I was the fool who decided to go ahead up the mountain. And, at the end, she was the one who told me to stay off the cliff. Dead, she tried to save my life. I suppose dying changes your point of view.

I didn't want to make the trip. Dicey and I had split almost ten years ago, after two years of very intense . . . what? camaraderie. Symbiosis. The sex was good, but it's hard to say we were actually in love. We had some fine times up in the mountains, and she took me on adventures I would have missed otherwise. What we shared, we really shared. But we didn't really strike a full chord. My spirit was a little too four-four maybe to complement the bright chaos she lived in. Too plaid, you know what I mean? Too L. L. Bean.

So Dicey kept up the adventures in the wild, and I spent more and

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more time in the city. One weekend in January, she went out to hike up Mt. Washington, and I went into Boston. She came back, and I came back, and we looked at each other and split. We didn't argue; we just split. I moved into the city then, into my place on Marlboro Street. Dicey moved up north, up to Bartlett, I think, right in the heart of the country she loved. I stopped hiking and dropped out of the AMC — the Appalachian Mountain Club. I got lost in my job and found things to do in Boston. After a while I stopped thinking about her.

Ten years later I got a call from her mother that Dicey was dead. You know, I wasn't surprised at first. I'd seen her come so close to the edge so many times. Fell off a mountain, tried to hug a bear — that was the kind of end I expected for Dicey. But her mom said no. It was man-made. Cancer.

Then I was surprised. Her mom didn't get specific, so I guess it was probably breast cancer or her uterus or some other organ that she didn't want to talk about. It didn't matter what kind, really. It had gotten into her and eaten her away, for two years, her mom said. I said I was sorry.

What else do you say after ten years?

Then her mom told me that Dicey had made out a will and that she'd put me in it. A request, not an heir. Dicey had had herself cremated, and she'd wanted me to dispose of her ashes. I listened to her mom explaining how the will specifically said me, and that I would know where to take her, and did I know where she meant?

I did. I stood with the phone dragging in my hand, looking out the window at a gray sky in the end of October, thinking about all the places Dicey had led me to, but there was only one she could have meant. And in my head, I was cursing her. It had been ten years, damn it. It was already too late in the season. I had a trip coming up to Cleveland for one of our biggest clients. I had a new woman friend. And it had been ten years.

I also knew that ten years ago, for two years, Dicey had been my bright side, my harmony, my other spirit. She had rights to my time.

I went to see her mom and got the box of ashes. I brought it back and set it on the mantel, a blue box about ten inches square. I decided it would have to wait till spring. And I sat down with a glass of scotch and wondered how the hell I was going to live with Dicey's ashes on my mantel for the next six months. I knew I would always be thinking about them, like a song that got stuck in my head.

I went to bed with it preying on my mind and woke up in the middle of

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the night, dazed from some dream I couldn't remember. I got up and went into the front room, looked out over Marlboro. The city was muted, the faint sounds a discord. The sky had cleared, and up through a glow of the city's million lights, I could just see an edge of moon hanging ahead of the dawn. Someone on the third floor across the street had put a jack-o'-lantern in their window, and the candle guttered in the last stages of life. It seemed out of place, even under the sickle moon, from a time when cities turned out their lights at night and people were much more in touch with the spirits of nature. The candle died out as I watched.

I turned then and saw Dicey, perched on my mantel in her tired jeans and old wool shirt, her hair pulled back in the long, dark braid she used to control it whenever we went hiking. She cocked her head and smiled. Her eyes sparkled, and for a moment she looked like a hunting bird, and I was the mouse a thousand feet below. Then she shook her head, and it was Dicey's box again, up on my mantel, caught in a pattern of light-and-dark shadow on the wall.

I went back to bed, but just as I fell asleep, I heard her say, "Life's too short, man — too, too short," just like she'd said every other time she'd led me off the trail to the edge of a cliff that wasn't listed in the guide.

The next day was bright and sunny. I went to work, but I spent the morning wondering about the duty Dicey had laid on me. About 10 o'clock I caught the weather, and it said clear and dry for the next few days. So I told the receptionist I was taking a couple of personal days, left a message for my friend, and rode the T over to the Star market under the Prudential Building.

I had to smile as I poked around the aisles looking for granola bars and sardines — what I called hiking food. I had always bought the food, because Dicey would have gone out with whatever was left in her pack and made do. I'd seen her catch a squirrel and stew it for dinner one night. I'd also seen her backtrack five miles to take back a mouse that had climbed into her pack the night before.

It took me just a minute to get my gear together. It was all in the back of the closet, where I'd stashed it when I moved in. I oiled my old boots and was packed and in the car by noon, heading for I-93 in midday traffic and wondering what I was really up to. I decided I just wanted it over and done with, the two years and the ten years, so I could get the song out of my head and get back to my job.

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I made the trip to Groveton in less than three hours, even with a stop in Plymouth for some white gas for the stove. I'd forgotten that they'd extended the interstate right up through Franconia Notch, which made the trip faster, and that's all I cared about then, getting in and getting out. I did slow down when the road curved around Profile Lake, to look back at the Old Man of the Mountain. There's a path that goes up above the head, and Dicey had taken me there one day. We didn't stay on the trail, of course. She took me down to a ledge below the chin, invisible from the trail above or the road below, and we sat for an hour, feet dangling over a fatal drop, listening to the music in the wind, in a solitude amazing for the center of New Hampshire's most famous landmark.

It's funny — there are chains and iron staples crisscrossing the head, trying to hold off the force of wind, rain, ice, and thaw. But someday it's all going to slide into Profile Lake anyway. When we'd clambered back up to the trail, Dicey had taken a big rock and pounded on one of the staples. Just to see what would happen, she said.

In Groveton I bore right off Route 3 onto 110, then turned left after a couple of miles onto Emerson Road and left again onto the Nash Stream Road. After a couple more miles, I found the cairns that marked the trailhead for the Percy Peaks trail. It was one of the first trips we'd made together.

Dicey had led me east off the trail, across two small peaks, and then up a steep slope to a long, gentle ridge just below timberline. A tiny glacial lake sat in the saddle of the ridge, ringed by fir and willow scrub. Dicey followed a tiny stream out of the lake to where it tumbled over a long stretch of steep steps down into a high-walled ravine. She went east along the top of the wall and led me out onto a cliff face that fell in broken ledges to the streambed. The drop was almost eight hundred feet.

The cliff isn't in the guide. On the AMC map, you can see the lake and the stream, but the cliff is just a dense band of contour lines, a blob of ink in the shifting pattern of the mountains. I'd showed it to Dicey, but she hadn't paid much attention. She used maps only to find the start of the trail.

I didn't expect to make it all the way that afternoon. The Percy trail was enough. The lower stretch follows logging roads, and those had changed in ten years. New roads cut across the old trail, scarring the ground. I got lost once and had to backtrack. Then the trail started

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climbing and became a real trail. I filled my water bottle and a quart jug at Slide Brook. The pack felt heavier than I liked, but there wasn't any other sure water before the lake.

The trail goes up to the North Peak, a graceful cone capped with bare slab ledges edged with scrub, and I was the only one on it. I wasn't surprised. It was the day before Halloween. Leaf season had been over up here for a couple of weeks, and some heavy rains had stripped the trees. The lower trail was thick with leaves, slick from recent rains. Higher up, under the spruce and fir, the air was cold, and it was chilly even in the bright sun when I came out on the lower slabs. The mountainsides had a feathered look in the places where bare gray hardwoods covered them. The spruce and fir were dark green, almost black where they were thick. The country was ready for winter, ready for snow and the long sleep.

I went to the top of the North Peak and spent some time watching the sun drop toward the horizon. Then a contrail striped the sky to the west and reminded me of the trip to Cleveland. I got impatient again and went down off the top. I found a campsite in the shadow between the peaks, off the trail in a small clearing made smooth by years of other campers. I set up my tent, a little two-person dome that seemed huge with only me in it, and got the stove going while the shadow turned into twilight.

When I was through with dinner, I sat wrapped in my sleeping bag in the silence in the doorway of the tent, sipping tea and looking up at the ragged vee of sky I could see through the trees, watching the stars turn. The sky was deep black, a depth you can never get with a city around you, or even a town. It's only in the mountains you can feel how far away the stars really are. And I began to get that distance, that sense of relief that usually comes on the third day of a long hike, when you look out over some valley and see a road below and realize that the road doesn't matter, that everything we do and build down there has no meaning outside the day-to-day importance we give it to keep ourselves content with it. And I didn't like that feeling, because I *was* content with my day-to-day in the city. I felt seduced, and a little used, which is what I used to feel whenever Dicey talked me into the woods when I didn't want to go.

I threw away the rest of the tea and went to sleep, a light sleep like I always have when I'm in the woods, half-awake half the time. And half the time when I woke up, I could feel a warmth beside me, and feel soft breathing in the night, a gentle presence that I almost took for granted.

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"Are you awake?" I said once, coming alert to a sound beyond the fabric dome, maybe the light step of some animal nosing around the stove. She sighed and touched my cheek and said, "No, not really." And I fell back to sleep and woke up again in early dawn, alone.

I packed my gear, but left it there in the clearing, hung up on a tree. I had brought along a day pack, and put the food and water in there, stowed carefully around the blue box that held Dicey's ashes. The day was frosty, but still clear, and I planned to be back there in just a few hours to pick up my stuff and head down the mountain for home. I figured it would take me about three hours to get to the cliff and three hours to get back. I didn't plan to stay there for longer than it took to scatter the ashes and think a few good thoughts. I planned to be back in Boston that night and back to work the next day, duty done and my head clear. So I checked the map, took a compass bearing, and set out east-northeast.

The going was rougher than I remembered, and I had to stop a lot to check the compass. With Dicey, it had been easy. She moved through the woods like an animal, or a dancer, quiet and sure of her way, even though she seldom took me anywhere she'd been before. She had a talent, a natural sense of elegance in the woods. She went slowly, in harmony. She never forced her way. And the path always seemed to open up in front of her. When she led me, I followed with a kind of clumsy grace. Alone now, I stumbled along in a bad rhythm, fighting the brush and the uneven ground. I was never quite sure of the compass, and I never saw the animals that Dicey always seemed to draw out of the woods.

I told her, riding there on my back, "I could sure use a little of your gift right now." And I could hear her laugh and tell me, "You've got it, man. You just don't trust it." And she was right.

But I went the right direction and climbed up onto the ridge. I was walking in eight-foot trees, on wet, stony ground made even rougher by twisted roots and low scrub. Grass grew in some places where the trees thinned, and there was cranberry and blueberry, willow, and labrador tea, depending on how wet the ground was. The last time we'd seen deer and a fox. We'd seen kinglets and siskins and red squirrels. Now they were hiding and silent.

The lake matched my memory perfectly, at first. It was small and almost round. The trees grew right up to the edge, crowding over the rocks and right into the water in some places. The water was shallow and clear,

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with a coarse, rocky bottom. It was a lake by definition only — nothing grew on the bottom. By its size, you'd call it a small pond. Dicey had gone right in when we first found it, threw off her pack and clothes and waded out to the center. The memory came back as bright as that day. The sun shone on her wet skin, and birds called from the trees while she waded and splashed in the clear, cold water, at home.

Then the lake and the memory stopped matching. The real sky was dim, hidden by high clouds that weren't supposed to be there. And I realized there were no birds, and no birdsong. The ridge was silent. I squatted down and felt the water. It was cold, much colder than I remembered. I waited, wondering if the birds would come back soon, listening.

What I heard was a sound like thunder to the north. But it played longer than thunder ever could, and suddenly two jet planes rammed by overhead and dipped into the valley behind me, flying tight formation as close to the trees as they could get. A wind followed them, blowing the spruce and fir in a long, broken wave. Then they were gone, a distant rumble to the south, and my ears rang in the false silence. The whole mountainside seemed shocked.

The jets just added to the sense of futility about the whole trip. They used the White Mountains for a training ground, and Dicey hated them. I saw her once stand out on a jutting rock hanging over Zealand Notch, yelling curses at one that kept diving down in mock fights with some imaginary tank or pillbox below. Now she couldn't curse; she could only ride in silence behind me and suffer the noise. I gave them a little halfhearted curse for her and hoped they wouldn't come back. She spoke in my ringing ears, but what she said was, "Say it louder. Believe it, man, believe it."

Instead, I waited by the lake for over an hour while the clouds got thicker and the jets went round and round the ridge. I kept hoping they would leave, so I could take Dicey's ashes over to the cliff and throw them out into silence. I grew more impatient, angry at the jets and angry at Dicey. Angry at myself for being there. My anger didn't matter. The jets kept strafing the ridge, first in formation, then separately, sometimes strafing each other in mock dogfights. Finally I said to hell with it, went down the stream to the top of the first ledge, and slabbed across the slope.

I came out of the trees suddenly, my feet on the edge of a twenty-foot

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I realized I was standing at the edge of a long, fatal fall.

drop that was the first long step in an eight-hundred-foot fall into the ravine below. The water played over the rocks to my right, shining and dancing down ledge after ledge till it disappeared below the lip of the cliff. I could hear its music on the rocks farther down. This was Dicey's choice, her headstone, a place she had been to only once that I knew of. A place that suited her so well I could feel her standing beside me. I stood for a moment, thinking about that.

Then I realized that it was quiet. I couldn't hear the jets. Only the water in the stream below. I slid my pack off quickly and took out the blue box. I wanted to get this done and over with, so Dicey could have her last rites in peace and so I could go back to the city.

I opened the lid and looked in. Her ashes were wrapped in a plastic bag that half-filled the box. I reached in and took out a handful. I don't know what I expected, something like wood ashes, I guess. Dicey's were pale gray, fine powder, coarse grit, even small shards. And there was so little of it, so little left of the woman she'd been. I took another moment to think of that, to try to frame an image out of this dust, an image to cast out with them. I felt I owed her that much.

I waited too long. I heard the jets coming from across the ridge, the sound growing in force and shape till it drowned out the music of the stream. I still couldn't see them, but the sound kept building. I started swearing, yelling at them to get the hell away and gone from there. Then they came into sight, twisting and veering into the valley, one chasing the other in another of their war games. They didn't fly off. They began looping and turning, circling around the lower peaks to the west and coming back to play in front of my cliff.

I yelled again, cursing them like Dicey had done before. I shook my fist at them, her ashes clenched in my hands. I felt her behind me, taut and angry, cursing with all the power of her death. The damn jets just circled one more time, I threw her ashes at them, crazy.

Then the two jets swerved together, and I saw their wings touch. Metal flew off in twisting scrap. The sound changed to a painful scream. One jet banked off to the south, smoke streaming from its wing. The other arched

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up and back and out of sight across the ridge. But I could hear its engine, still shrieking and suddenly coming closer.

I realized I was standing at the edge of a long, fatal fall. I bent and grabbed Dicey's box, scrambled for the lid, and ran back away from the ledge, away from the drop, while the shriek became a wail still coming closer, just over my shoulder. I ran like a panicked animal, fighting through the brush. Spruce needles stabbed at my eyes. Branches grabbed at the box in my arms. The mountainside seemed malicious, intent on trapping me there in the shadow of the screaming jet. I could hear it coming, feel the sound and the push of air as it came over the ridge and dove toward me. And then the scream stopped in a hammerblow that struck out feeling, sound, and sight.

The cold woke me. I was lying on the ground, shivering. There was pain in my head, hard, steady pressure that dulled my hearing and touch. I opened my eyes and saw dirt and coarse gravel in dim light. I rolled over carefully. The pain in my head pulsed with each movement. Then I tried to sit up. Nausea rose out of my stomach into my head and left me dizzy and gasping, flat on my back again. My vision blurred and split. The shivering grew to a spasm.

When it passed, I lay there, looking up through fir branches at a dim orange dome. The light was strangely opaque, without direction. I could hear a steady rhythm like rain on cloth, but dull and lifeless, without real sound. Cold water dripped in a crazy pattern on my left hand.

I tried to make sense of the orange dome, but I couldn't control my vision. I looked around, slowly because every movement made my stomach twist. The branches above me seemed to twist and sway of their own will. I followed them to the trunk, followed the trunk down toward the ground, and came to a face staring at me with a crazy, slack-eyed smile.

I stared back, still trying to understand, trying to force some harmony into the discord I got from my eyes. It was like seeing from two places at once. But I finally took in the blue flight suit and the harness and the lines leading up from the harness to the edges of the orange dome that covered the trees above us.

It was the pilot. He'd tried to eject, but he hadn't made it, and his parachute had settled on the trees above me. His suit had been torn by the branches, and one stuck through his left arm like the broken butt of a spear. His feet dangled inches above the ground. Somewhere in his fall,

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he'd lost his helmet, and with it, his left ear. His left eye hung open, and his face was streaked with dried blood. His head hung loosely on a neck that looked a little too long, angled down, staring at me. Grinning.

Strangely enough, his right side was undamaged. his face split in my broken vision, shifting from a death mask to a pleasant smile whenever I moved my eyes. I felt colder than ever.

"Better move, man," I heard a voice say. I stared hard at the pilot. He winked at me.

"Gotta get warm, get a fire." The voice came again, but not from the pilot. I looked around, my head pounding so badly it drowned out all sound. I was alone, just me and the pilot and the box of Dicey's ashes in the crook of my arm. But the voice was right. The light was fading, and it was going to get colder. I had to move.

I made it to my knees and had to rest. My head alternated between pain and nausea, and I knew I wasn't going to go far. I had no idea where the cliff was, where I'd dropped my pack, and there was no way I could beat around in the brush looking for it. But I had matches in a plastic case in my pocket, and there was plenty of squaw wood on the trees around me. I just had to get up and get it.

That took more will than I thought I had. The clouds had settled on the mountaintop, and everything was wet and slippery. I could carry only a little bit at a time, because I needed one hand free to hold on to the trees. I still fell a lot.

After two trips, I had a pile of dry twigs and branches, plenty to start a fire, but nothing big enough to keep it going. I couldn't break the larger branches. I was just too clumsy and weak. I looked up at the pilot, and he grinned back, like he was waiting for me. So I went out again, and I found a dead trunk, lying on the hillside just above the parachute trees. I couldn't cut it, but it was small enough to roll down the few feet and under shelter. I slumped on the ground beside it, too tired to build the fire I had been working for.

I was staring at my feet, trying to will myself to move, when I heard a noise like a door swinging open on rusty hinges. I looked up and saw a big raven sitting on a branch just under the lip of the parachute tent. The light was fading quickly, and he was no more than a silhouette, black on gray, but I could see one eye cocked to stare at me.

Ravens don't just hunt — they're carrion birds. I said, "Don't look at

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me. He's the dead one." I nodded my head toward the pilot.

The raven turned his eye that way and seemed to shake his head no.

I looked over at the pilot. He winked again.

I was too cold and too dizzy, and my head hurt too much. I looked from the pilot to the raven and back, and gave up trying to understand. I made a small fire in the center of the triangle of trees shielded by the parachute, rolled one end of my dead tree into it, and huddled close. The raven sat on his branch to my left, the pilot hung on my right, and Dicey's box sat beside me. The light outside died completely, and my little fire made shadows on the parachute. The raven shook and preened his feathers, and hopped to a closer branch.

I tried to stay awake, feeding the dead tree bit by bit into the fire, turning different sides of myself to the warmth to dry off. Half of me stayed damp, because I couldn't bring myself to turn my back on the pilot. At some point, though, I fell asleep, and Dicey said, "It's O.K., man. I'm watching."

I woke up in dead night. The fire had burned to embers, and my back was cold. The dim light barely lit the lower branches of the trees, but I could see the raven, head tucked beneath one wing, still on his branch. And the pilot still hung from his tree, left eye shining wide. Dicey sat beside me, legs crossed Indian style, her box cradled between them.

"I thought there would be more to give back to the earth," she said. "I didn't realize so much would go up in the fire." She paused and glanced over at me, smiling. Half-teasing. "I thought about not being cremated," she said, "but I didn't think they'd let you carry my body in here to rot."

"Not likely," I said. I reached out and pushed the dead tree onto the embers, then laid some smaller branches around it. They caught and flared briefly, and Dicey faded. Then they died back a bit, and she was there, flickering gently as the fire licked the dead tree.

"Why me?" I asked her. "After ten years, why me?"

She shrugged. "You still knew the way," she said.

"Anyone with a map . . .," I started to say, but she shook her head and stopped me.

"It isn't the same," she said.

"I told her, "Bullshit."

She sighed. "Tomorrow," she said, watching the fire, "you should be able to finish this and go back to your city."

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I couldn't tell if she was asking or apologizing. I shrugged back.

"Was it all that bad?" she asked.

"No," I said, "I like getting blown up."

The pilot rolled his left eye and began to laugh.

The sound was dank and leering. The raven woke and cocked his head at us all. Dicey frowned into the fire.

"I'd expect you to laugh about death," she said.

The pilot settled back into his grin. "No sense dying if you can't laugh about it," he said.

"I don't think it's so damn funny," I said to him.

"You're not dead yet, little man," he said back.

"Your kind of death is never funny," Dicey told him.

"Not during," he said. He tried to nod his head, but it only lolled to the side. "During," he said, "it's like breaking in a virgin. It's like climbing Mount Everest on a dirt bike."

"During," Dicey said back, "it's like breathing cold blood. It's like eating hot glass dipped in vomit."

"Hey," the pilot said, "It ain't my fault you picked a shitty way to die."

"You didn't pick your death," Dicey told him.

"Oh yeah?" he said. "Look at me. How else was I going to die?" He held his arms out to the side, left one trailing the broken branch. Dicey glanced up. Her face was stiff and sad.

"If I'd known you'd like it so much, I wouldn't have wasted my breath cursing you."

The pilot laughed again. "Oh, my avenging angel," he cried, "spare me, spare me." And he laughed some more. "How about you, man?" he said to me then. "You were the one throwing the ashes. Are you sorry?"

I admit I wasn't, but he didn't need an answer. "Well, don't be," he said. "You gave me the ride of my life, and now I've got eternity to try to match it."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You don't think this is it, do you?" he said, pointing at Dicey's box. "Ashes to ashes? Come on."

I looked at the box, and at Dicey. She was staring at him, still frowning, but almost puzzled.

"What else is there?" I asked.

"How the hell do I know?" he said. "That's what's so funny." And he

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lolled back his head and laughed and laughed and laughed. Tears ran out of his right eye. His left one tried to shut and couldn't. "But I tell you," he said finally, still chuckling, "I tell you, it's gotta be something. I could be the next Thor. I could be Shiva. I could be Hades."

"I'd be content to be a dryad living in that tree," Dicey said quietly.

"Oh, you think so damn small," the pilot said. "Look at your power. Look what you did to me. You could be Death herself."

Dicey laughed then, a short, bitter sound. "No," she said, "I take things too personally. There." She pointed at the raven. "There's Death, waiting for his dinner."

"That old crow?" the pilot said. "What's he going to do, nibble off my nose?"

Dicey smiled thinly. "Watch," she said.

She laid her right hand, palm up, on the ground in front of her and started humming a strange, high song. The raven cocked his head, watching her face. A deer mouse crept into the firelight. It stopped and looked around, nose twitching, then crept closer to Dicey's hand. She kept singing, and the pilot and I both watched like we were hypnotized.

Suddenly the raven gave a harsh croak and dropped from his branch onto the mouse. He grabbed it with one claw and lifted it to his beak. The mouse squealed. The raven shook his beak sharply, three times. Then he turned up his head and swallowed the mouse whole. His neck worked as he forced it down.

"There is Death," Dicey said quietly. "No malice." She glanced up at the pilot. "No glory."

"Ah, but what flavor," the pilot said. "What pleasure to catch and eat such a morsel as a living spirit, however small." He winked his good eye at her.

Dicey sighed and seemed to fade. I rubbed my eyes and realized that the dark was fading. The rain had stopped, and the mist flowed gray. It wasn't dawn, but a thinning of the darkness before the idea of dawn. The raven stretched his wings and took a few hops out of our haven.

Dicey turned and asked me, "Can you see better?"

"Not you," I said.

"That doesn't matter," she said. "Can you see well enough to go to the cliff?"

"I don't know. Which way is it?"

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"I'll lead you," she said, "before it gets too light. Then you can scatter these." She laid her hand on the box.

"The last rites are important, man," the pilot said. "We're stuck here until you let go of us."

"Is that right?" I asked Dicey.

"Memory is the only power you have over death," she said. "Memory and your love."

"Oh bullshit," the pilot said.

Dicey got up and walked after the raven.

It wasn't so easy for me. I was stiff in every muscle. My head still hurt when I moved. But at least my sight had come back to a single image. I took the box, pulled myself up, and went after her.

The mist was swirling in a light wind, and strange lights shone here and there among the trees. I looked for Dicey, but all I could see were shadows. The land looked flattened, dull, like my hearing. Then I saw her, standing just a few feet away, looking at a twisted piece of metal that had wrapped itself around a tree at head height. I felt my skin crawl when I saw it and thought how close it had come to me. Beyond it, the mountainside was littered with more scrap. Trees had been knocked down or sheared off, brush flattened by the death of the plane. Dicey shook her head and picked a path around the wreckage. The mist swirled around her, and she was no more solid than the flickering lights.

Then I heard a noise behind me and turned. The pilot lurched out from under the parachute. I could see his left eye gleaming. He stopped and pulled the branch out of his arm, and then came after us, using it as a cane. His body jerked each time he put his weight onto his bent left leg. His head wobbled on his stretched neck.

He came up beside me and grinned. "Thought I'd come along for the wake," he said.

Dicey just kept walking, and I went after her, with the pilot lurching beside me. He didn't seem bothered by the uneven ground or undergrowth, just by his crooked left leg. But I was having trouble. It was still dark enough that deep shadows hid the path, and the spirit lights made the shadows shift and dance. I tripped over roots and stones and slid on wet brush. Dicey kept her back to the pilot and walked too fast. I lost her in the trees.

But the pilot said, "Over here," and led me into a thick cluster of young

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spruce trees. I put my arm up to protect my face and pushed through. The pilot was right in front of me. And suddenly I stepped out into nothing.

I grabbed for the branches as my right foot came down on air and kept going. My left foot slid after, and I was hanging from the trees over a drop that I couldn't see. I heard Dicey's box scrape across stone and then land hard below me. I got my arms around a trunk and pulled myself up through the sharp spruce until I could stand. Then I looked down.

A rock face fell away into darkness below me. I could just make out a narrow ledge about twenty feet down. Beyond that, darkness. The pilot stood out on the air over the drop and laughed at me.

Then Dicey was there beside me. "Are you all right?" she asked.

I said, "yes," but I pointed down at the ledge. Her box was sitting there, leaning against the face of the cliff. "I dropped it," I said.

She looked down at it. She was quiet a long time. Then she said, "It's O.K. It's not that important."

"Damn it!" I said. "If it isn't important, why the hell did you ask me to do it?" I looked around for a way down to the ledge.

"Forget it," she said. "It's not worth risking your life. Let the wind scatter them."

"They're in a plastic bag," I told her. "They'll be there forever."

I found a way, a crease in the rock that angled down to a spot a few yards from the box. I made my way along the edge, holding on to the trees, and then started working down the crease. I didn't look down. I just jammed my fingers into the crease, braced my feet on the rock, and slid down a step at a time. Dicey seemed to walk down beside me. The pilot watched and grinned. I could feel his scorn, like a heavy mist I had to force my way through.

Then I was at the ledge and had to let go of the crease to reach the box. I hesitated, getting my breath and trying to think only about the box, not about the drop into darkness below me.

"Go back up," Dicey said. "You're not responsible for my death."

"Sure," the pilot said. "Let her hang around here with her trees. She's not afraid for you, anyway. She's afraid of dying."

"She's already dead, asshole," I yelled at him, and the words echoed across the ravine, along with his laughter.

So I let go and took nine careful steps along the ledge. I kept my left hand on the face of the cliff beside me and leaned in the few inches I

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could. My right hand hung out over space. Dicey came behind me, faint now, a ghost of the spirit of the woman.

I reached the box. I crouched and hooked it with my right hand and worked it up the side of my body, still leaning on my left hand to keep some contact with the solid cliff. Finally I could turn and lean my back against the rock, both feet braced against the angle of the ledge. I took a breath and pried off the top. I spread the mouth of the plastic bag.

But I wasn't able to touch the ashes. My heart was pounding, and each beat was a pain behind my eyes. My ears hummed. I couldn't think of anything but pain and the pilot's grin and the long drop beyond my feet.

"Dicey?" I said. "Dicey, what if I don't do this? Would you stay here? Would you last as some kind of mountain spirit?" I was asking as much about me as about her, but I remembered how she moved in the forest. "Wouldn't you like that?" I asked her.

"There's nothing I can touch," she said, "except imagining."

"I'd come," I said. "Others would come. We could visit."

"One night a year?" she asked. "Like an old ritual?" She laughed softly, almost wishfully. "You'd forget me," she said, "the real me. Like you forgot the mountains. The mountains are rock, at least. They take longer to wear away. I'm not, and I wouldn't."

I took a handful of ashes then and remembered her as best I could, trying to think of the live Dicey and not the spirit beside me. But when I held up my hand and opened my eyes to throw the ashes out into the dawn, I saw the pilot, hanging in front of me. Grinning.

"Move," I said.

"Hey," he said, goading me, "I'm not really here, right? Just throw. Get her out of your hair."

"Move, God damn you," I said.

He just laughed and said, "If she's right, I already am."

I realized I was crying. For Dicey. My indifference, my anger — they had faded somewhere climbing down the cliff. I was mourning, and my body shook with crying. I held up a handful of her ashes, but I couldn't throw them.

I swung my fist at him, but he floated out of my reach. I kicked out at him, and balanced on one foot at the edge of the drop. I felt the foot slipping. Dicey cried out, and I felt her hand like a breath on my arm. I went right through it, falling.

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But my foot slipped straight out, and I simply sat down hard on the ledge with an undignified thump. The pilot laughed at me, but I still had the box and the handful of ashes. I was still alive. I started laughing, too, at myself, for fighting with a dead man. For fighting with myself. For fighting with the mountain. I laughed until the pilot stopped, and I laughed some more as he realized the night was ending. His face twisted, and he tried to say something, but he was fading faster. I ignored him, waiting quietly for full dawn.

I turned once to Dicey, but she was fading, too, and we had nothing more to say. I held out my handful of ashes and let them fall. And then the next handful, and the next. The mist blew off, and the light grew. Dicey was gone; her ashes were gone where she wanted. I had done the ritual that friendship demanded. And I suddenly realized I could hear the sound

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of the stream, playing on the rocks far below. I could hear birdsong, and, back toward the wreckage of the plane, the call of ravens.

I climbed back up the crease. It was hard, but I made it. And I found my pack where I'd dropped it the day before. I ate and drank, suddenly aware of the needs of my living body. While I was finishing a handful of raisins, I heard voices on the mountainside above me, and the sound of a helicopter coming closer beyond the ridge.

I put on my pack and went the other way, along the edge to the end of the cliff and down into the ravine to follow the stream to the road. The pilot was half-right. You can at least choose how you will live your life. Dicey was half-right, too. I went through the woods in a new harmony, and the path opened before me.

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Coming Attractions

AS WE move through the dog-days of summer into the beginning of the school year, the magazine regains some of its boundaries. The August issue was fairly free-flowing, moving from genre to genre, sometimes within a single story. September's stories have clearer definitions, and use those definitions to gain some of their strength.

Brian Stableford returns to our pages with one of the most powerful science fiction stories we've seen in a long time, "The Invisible Worm." It's the tale of a man alone in his house with a baby — only the house, genetically designed for comfort, starts a rebellion of its own.

Lynn Hightower makes her second appearance with an equally moving fantasy story, "Journal of the First Voyage," about Christopher Columbus's illegitimate son, who makes a discovery quite different from that of his father.

And "Oh Miranda," by George Zebrowski and Charles Pellegrino, provides the basis for one of the most stunning covers we've had in some time.

In September, you'll also find a science fiction novelette about strange murders committed on an out of the way colony, a high fantasy coming of age story with a twist, and a chilling horror story about the death of innocence.

In future issues, watch for stories by Jane Yolen, Mike Resnick, Marc Laidlaw, Vance Aandahl, Paul Di Filippo, Ray Aldridge and many others. And renew your subscription in time for our special anniversary issue, which, this year, will be the biggest issue of new fiction we've ever published.

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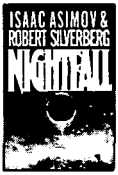

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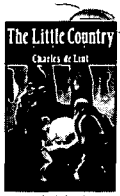

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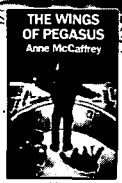

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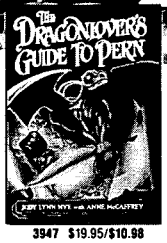

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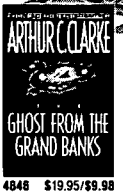

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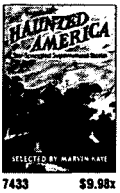

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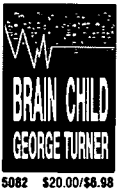

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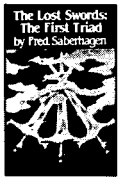

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